

## Kissing Fabulose Queens: The Fabulous Realism of Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

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Through the inclusion of the Fur Queen—a beauty-pageant winner whose photo acts as the embodiment of a gender-ambiguous Cree trickster figure who guides and guards the Okimasis brothers—Tomson Highway's semi-autobiographical *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (hereafter *Kiss*) eloquently depicts an alternative, circular, and queer temporality. Highway guides his readers through the physical and psychological abuses of the Okimasis brothers that occurred roughly from 1959 to 1966. *Kiss* depicts Gabriel and his older brother Jeremiah as they attempt to confront the traumas inflicted upon them by the head priest, Father LaFleur, of the Birch Lake Indian Residential School. Prohibited from speaking Cree, forbidden to interact with the rest of their family, physically beaten and sexually abused, the boys enter young adulthood scarred by the marks of the residential school system's attempts to "modernize" their "primitive" Cree subjectivities. Throughout the narrative, Highway illustrates how both brothers as adults transform their traumatic childhoods—Jeremiah through music and Gabriel through dance—into powerful affective states that enact a decolonization of their minds and bodies, primarily through the exorcism and abjection of Roman Catholicism. This decolonization enables the brothers to claim the realm of the so-called "unintelligible" First Nations subject as a viable identity. By examining Gabriel's ability to reinvent fabulously his subjectivity, and reposition himself in a colonial "reality," I demonstrate the emotive power of indigenously queer identification—Two-Spiritedness—to fabulate a tolerable, though not utopic, existence. By paying particular attention to Highway's fabulous interpretation of the Trickster figure as both pan-tribal and critical of heteronormativity, this paper situates itself against the existing criticism of *Kiss* that neither analyzes Highway's use of the pan-tribal Trickster nor engages with the ideologies surrounding Two-Spiritedness. Simultaneously, I examine Gabriel's ability to access a Cree temporality that resists the strict linear progression of Western capitalism and dominant Canadian culture through an examination of Gabriel's relation to "the essence of warm honey" (Highway 79).

Within the last twenty years, queer theory and queerness have come to signify a deconstructive paradigm born from the fruits of feminist and anti-homophobic scholarship. Queer theorists contend that gender and sexual orientation are social constructions and that there are multitudes of

subjects who do not conform to what Judith Butler identifies as the heterosexual matrix:

A hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (208 n6)

Butler's heterosexual matrix is one aspect of heteronormativity: a normative regime that reads and judges other genders and sexualities through heterosexuality. Queer theorists have underscored the pervasive power of heterosexuality to infiltrate all manner of being: it impinges upon the temporality of heterosexual lives (marriage, reproduction); the spaces that heterosexuals inhabit (suburbia); the bodies of heterosexuals (able-bodied, white). By embracing the epithet "queer" as opposed to gay or lesbian, subjects are actively (re)claiming a political identity that seeks to unmask the multifarious fictions of heteronormativity.

The Two-Spirit is a unique indigenous sexual and gender identity, and individuals who identify as such are said to possess masculine and feminine spirits within one sexed body. The term was codified at the third annual gathering of gay and lesbian Native people in Winnipeg in 1990, in order to provide a counterdiscourse to white GLBTQ movements and the imposition of the term *berdache* (Driskill, "Doubleweaving" 72). Scholars such as Qwo-Li Driskill insist that the term enables indigenous people to form a sovereign erotic: "an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations" (Driskill, "Stolen" 51). Driskill appears to opine that the Two-Spirit references a pre-colonial gender and sexual utopia where all behaviour was embraced, positioning white supremacist culture as the harbinger of homophobia. Contrarily, and in response to such positions as Driskill's, Daniel Heath Justice argues, "[s]uch sweeping assumptions, while comforting, don't always stand up to scrutiny; they assume the universality of an ironically Edenic tolerance and lack of complex concepts for issues of sexuality and gender that aren't paralleled in any other facet of Indigenous cultural expression" (215). In short, regarding gender and sexuality, indigenous traditions could have been just as oppressive as colonial ideologies prior to colonialism, albeit through a different ideological structure.

This raises certain problems surrounding the deployment of Two-Spiritedness and queerness. Current understandings of queerness within academia are meant to reflect the non-signifiable position of a subject that resists the imposition of heteronormative discourses and the imperative to identify as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Contrarily, Two-Spirit identity speaks to a specific community and is a reaction against the whiteness of dominant GLBTQ politics. At its core, Two-Spiritedness serves as a critique of dominant sexual dissident communities that

privilege whiteness, and exists as an identification for indigenous subjects. Thus, while both terms attempt to subvert heteronormativity, Two-Spiritedness brings to the fore issues concerning race, ethnicity, indigeneity, naming, and spirituality as they relate to gender and sexual identities. What constitutes queerness is therefore taken a step further; thus, while the terms share a genesis in their critiques of heteronormativity, they are not interchangeable, but rather are more analogous to cousins. For Highway, Gabriel initially appears as queer, in that he does not attempt to subvert both colonial and heteronormative discourses, but comes to embody Two-Spiritedness when he comes to recognize that his oppression is mutually constituted through heteronormativity and colonialism.

### “Why do you think I put on these faaabulous shows?”: Highway’s Fur Queen

North American Indian mythology is inhabited by the most fantastic creatures...Foremost of these beings is the ‘Trickster,’ as pivotal and important a figure in our world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. ‘Weesageechak’ in Cree, ‘Nanabush’ in Ojibway, ‘Raven’ in others, ‘Coyote’ in still others, this Trickster goes by many names and many guises...

The most explicit distinguishing feature between North American Indian languages and the European languages is that in Indian (e.g. Cree, Ojibway), there is no gender...the male-female-neuter hierarchy is entirely absent. So that by this system of thought, the central hero figure from our mythology—theology, if you will—is theoretically neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously. (Highway n.p.)

The above epigraph is an abridged passage from “A Note on the Trickster,” which Highway includes at the beginning of *Kiss*. Highway, referred to by Kristina Fagan as “the most famous spokesperson for the trickster-worldview” (4), makes a number of assertions in the epigraph regarding the tradition of the Trickster. First, Highway positions the Trickster as a “pivotal and important figure” in “North American Indian Mythology.” In an attempt to depict an almost universal oppression and working within the neo-tradition of the pan-tribal trickster, Highway, in his “Note” and within the novel itself, represents the various tribal manifestations of Weesageechak, Nanabush, Raven, and Coyote as one homogenous, monolithic figure: “Honeypot, if I were you, I’d watch my tongue. Cuz you’re talkin’ to Miss Maggie Sees. Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap-oh-you-should-hear-the-things-they-call-me-honeypot-Sees” (234). Highway’s trickster paradoxically reduces traditional, tribally specific mythologies into one being, and provides diverse, dispersed indigenous peoples with the ability to congregate around a shared cultural sign. It is, thus, a conscious fabulation on the part of Highway: “This conscious recreation of a tradition does not mean that the contemporary manifestations of the trickster are in any way ‘fake.’ But they are, like all instances of ‘tradition,’ recreated because of specific and current needs” (Fagan 12).

As a result, Highway's rendition of the traditional Trickster in the form of the Fur Queen speaks to the specific needs of metropolitan indigenous people—specifically, gender and sexual dissidents—and is neo-traditional given the need for formally disparate tribes to come together in metropolitan locales.

The actual Fur Queen that Abraham Okimasis, the Okimasis patriarch, meets after he wins the Millington Cup World Championship Dog Derby at the beginning of the novel is Miss Julie Pembroke of Wolverine River, Manitoba, a young, exceptionally fair (i.e. white) girl. Whiteness envelops her: “the radiant Miss Pembroke was draped not with a white satin sash but with a floor-length cape fashioned from the fur of arctic fox, white as day. She had her head crowned with a fox-fur tiara” (Highway 9). When Abraham first sets eyes upon her, and when Gabriel is dying, she is a “white flame,” until she begins to take shape and he can discern a “young woman so fair her skin looked chiseled out of arctic frost, her teeth pearls of ice, lips streaks of blood, eyes white flames in a pitch-black night” (10, 305). Diana Brydon notes the similarities between the Fur Queen and a vampire, suggesting that the Fur Queen is “embodying the threat of a white culture maintaining its vitality through sucking the blood of the colonised” (21). Although Brydon's observation is astute, it is important to note that within Western discourses the vampire is a noted motif of the *vagina dentata*, the female that castrates.<sup>1</sup> Since Highway chooses the image of a young white woman to embody his Trickster, she becomes a hybrid figure, straddling both white and indigenous cultures, and it is possible to read her as castrating the phallic potency of a pure, impenetrable white culture that constructs indigeneity and sexual dissidence as abject.

Misogynistic phallic imagery dominates representations of both straight and colonial cultural practices. Highway emphasizes this when Jeremiah notes the “Penetration” of North America in his History lesson. Straightness, as a normative sexuality, is often, but not always, associated with a healthy, virile, and masculine body. Two-Spiritedness and queerness embody perversion because heteronormative discourses conceive of the gay male body as primarily inclined to desire penetration, thus diminishing the phallic potency of the receiving male by becoming feminine. The castrating Fur Queen disputes the assumption that sexual dissidence, femininity, and penetration are akin to powerlessness.

Returning to the epigraph, though, Highway asserts that the Trickster figure is a gender liminal being in Native American Indian mythology. The universality of Highway's claim is, however, contestable. In her introduction to *Troubling Tricksters*, Fagan deconstructs the pervasiveness of the Trickster in Native studies, and counters Highway's claim that the Cree Trickster is genderless. Fagan discloses that a Cree elder, Maria Campbell, informed her that “despite the lack of gendered pronouns in the Cree language, “Elder Brother” [a Cree trickster figure] is not genderless; he is a male who sometimes disguises himself as a female” (10).

Examining Highway's "A Note on the Trickster" also illustrates that this Trickster is by default envisioned as male: "*he* can assume any guise he chooses... *his* role is to teach us... *he* straddles the consciousness of man and that of God" (n.p.; emphases added). Although Highway initially wrote the manuscript in Cree and translated it into English, he still privileges masculine pronouns in his "Note." This para-textual gendering is illuminating given his willingness to use ambiguous pronouns when Gabriel encounters a gender-ambiguous figure (Highway 168); the subversive power of Highway's Fur Queen lies in the inherently masculine originary gender that Highway displaces in favour of representing the Trickster as predominantly feminine. Furthermore, the Fur Queen as a Trickster is not only in gender-drag, but has donned the garb of whiteness, enabling her to move amongst the brothers unnoticed as an authority figure until the brothers can come to respect their indigeneity. While the occlusion of the tribally specific trickster syncretizes the diversity of indigenous heroes into one figure, which intimates a lack of diversity within Indigenous traditions for non-Indigenous subjects who are unaware of the nuances inherent to each hero, this neo-traditional Trickster permits Highway to effectively move his narrative through white, indigenous, sexually dissident, and heteronormative cultures, a hybridizing gesture which takes precedence over maintaining exclusionary traditions.

Highway's neo-traditional, pan-tribal Fur Queen enables him to represent a distinctly Cree temporality. In an interview with Suzanne Methot, Highway expresses his distaste for English with regards to its inability to represent circular time: "everything is so difficult to explain in English. And the business of [circular] time doesn't translate." Cree understandings of time are not strictly linear; they do not separate past and present to the extent that westernized time does. In her analysis of Nanabush, the Trickster in Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, Lina Perkins writes,

Nanabush's time is a 'time of the Other' not because it is 'separate' from westernized time or from the time-scheme followed by the rest of the play, but because it is of a different nature. In Nanabush's time, past and present are both intertwined and distinct. His function is to communicate his sense of time to the rest of the characters. (260)

Perhaps more significantly, although Nanabush exists in the play as an "embodied memory," he "functions more as a catalyst for memory than as something to be remembered" (Perkins 260-262). Hence, the Fur Queen—a literary descendant and potential amelioration of the earlier Nanabush figure—functions as a re-articulation of indigenous cultural memory that encourages not only cross-tribal interaction, but is also the key—the essence and embodiment of fabulousness—that grants the brothers, specifically Gabriel, access to their own traumatic histories. This allows Gabriel the power to use his sexual pleasure as a form of healing energy when he embraces Two-Spiritedness in the second half of the novel.

“The essence of warm honey”: On the Two-Spiritedness of Gabriel Okimasis

Highway associates Gabriel’s ability to feel pleasure and pain with “the essence of warm honey” at numerous points in the novel (79, 120-121, 132, 169, 191, 283). Each instance relates to Gabriel’s sexuality in some manner; be it when he engages in sexual intercourse, uses sexually inflected words, or is covering the lesions spread by the HIV/AIDS virus, “warm honey” is intimately tied to Gabriel’s sexuality. It is possible to read Highway as metaphorically rendering semen as warm honey in *some*, but not all, of these sections—a point I take up at each passage. I initially read the text to be insinuating a correlation between warm honey and semen, but such readings not only impose upon Gabriel the position of the penetrated body, a point which is left ambiguous as the novel progresses, but they ignore the nuances of their respective passages, and the representation of “honey” in the text as a whole.

Honey and fireweed are two recurring natural images throughout the text. Deanna Reder pays particular attention to the presence of fireweed, a deep pink flower—representing simultaneously phallic and clitoral imagery—found throughout North America, in her analysis of *Kiss*. Reder insists that the plant, known for its ability to grow out of fire-ravaged soil, acts as a metaphor for indigenous autobiography because Jeremiah and Gabriel are both able to flower, despite their traumatic past (279). Fireweed makes its first appearance in the novel when Abraham meets the Fur Queen; whilst Abraham believes that “he must have been dreaming,” the Fur Queen, believed to be a “goddess,” is “sending off ripples of warm air redolent of pine needles and fertile muskeg and wild fireweed” (Highway 10-11). Fireweed, which possesses the properties to create a substance akin to honey, is associated with the liminal dream world of the Fur Queen, “weaver of dreams, sparker of magic” (234). Furthermore, as Gabriel, in the form of the child-about-to-be-born, weaves his way through “the land of dreams,” he prances through a “forest lit in hues of mauve and pink and turquoise” (33). Mauve and pink are colours consistently associated with fireweed throughout the book. Fireweed thus comes to act as a path to the Fur Queen and her world of dreams; warm honey comes to act as the trigger that reminds Gabriel of this aforesaid path.

Although Gabriel’s heart-wrenching death from complications of AIDS draws attention to the realities of the disease, his refusal to luxuriate in victimhood permits him to engage with the traumas of his personal and cultural past. Gabriel initially fabulizes “the essence of warm honey” during sexual encounters to ignore the pain of sexual abuse; but by the end of the text he is able to draw on the subversive potential associated with his ability to access his own *mithoopoowamoowin* (good dream power) (Highway 247). *Mithoopoowamoowin*, as I understand Highway’s deployment of the term, refers to an individual’s ability to put into action

their dreaming capabilities, which for the Cree are not solely imaginative but hold certain spiritual and magical significance (Bulkeley 254). By acknowledging the legitimacy of his sexual desires and the worth of his Cree heritage, Gabriel is able to decolonize his body. Gabriel dissolves and refutes the colonial ideologies that construct his indigenous and Two-Spirited body as inferior, and overcomes the cannibalistic Weetigo of Cree myth that Wendy Pearson aptly defines as “the priest...the monster who devours small children...[and] the spirit of whiteness, of heteronormativity, and of masculinity” (“National Entity” 90). The Weetigo is a fitting sign of colonialism’s never ending consumption and appropriation of indigeneity, and Gabriel’s ability to defeat it at the end of the novel indicates that he possesses the ability to subvert colonial ideologies that construct indigenously queer individuals as abject.

Interestingly, Highway describes Gabriel’s first sexual assault through the actions he is witnessing in a dream: “Gabriel’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” (77). It is only in the next paragraph that readers discover that Father Lafleur’s right arm was “buried under Gabriel’s bedspread, under his blanket, under his sheet, under his pyjama bottoms. And the hand was jumping up, reaching for him, pulling him back down, jumping up, reaching for him, pulling him back down” (78). Gabriel’s first sexual encounter, undeniably (statutory) rape, yet containing a mixture of pleasure and fear—“he didn’t dare open his eyes for fear the priest would get angry”—is intimately tied to dreams (78).<sup>2</sup> Climactically, in the moment that the silver crucifix, not Father Lafleur’s penis, penetrates Gabriel’s mouth, Gabriel associates this pedophilic assault with something pleasurable:

Gradually, Father Lafleur bent, closer and closer, until the crucifix that dangled from his neck came to rest on Gabriel’s face. The subtly throbbing motion of the priest’s upper body made the naked Jesus Christ—this sliver of silver light, this fleshly Son of God so achingly beautiful—rub his body against the child’s lips, over and over and over again. Gabriel had no strength left. The pleasure in his centre welled so deep that he was about to open his mouth and swallow the whole living flesh—in his *half-dream state*, this man nailed to the cross was a living, breathing man, tasting like Gabriel’s most favourite food, *warm honey*. (78-79; emphases added)

Gabriel receives pleasure from the experience, which is not to condone child sexual abuse, or to suggest that there is a correlation between sexual abuse and dissident sexual identities; rather, this is a complex scenario, and, although traumatic, it affords the young Gabriel some modicum of pleasure.

Jennifer Henderson rightly observes that “the scene of Gabriel’s first experience of sexual abuse is both a scene of violation and...an initiation into a particular *mise en scene* of desire” (190). Henderson’s project is to read the sexual politics of Highway’s text through the theoretical paradigms proposed by Ann Cvetkovich; Henderson opines that through

the repetition of seemingly masochistic sex Gabriel is able to revisit the site of his abuse and, in so doing, heal (191-192). I concur with Henderson that Gabriel's abuse is the genesis for the affective states of his future sexual encounters. In addition, by becoming a willing participant he is able to engage with his traumatic past; nonetheless, I believe the associations of fireweed and honey are more powerful than memories and are metaphorical keys to his fabulous potential. However, it is not possible to condemn Gabriel's masochism; I do not think it is possible to posit a healthy or unhealthy reaction to trauma: there is a spectrum of possibilities, and what feels productive and healthy is, perhaps, more helpful than what the medical institution considers a "healthy recovery." There is no denying that Gabriel is led into a cycle of repetition, but Gabriel eventually comes to actively reject the dominant phallic position that the priest represents. Through his early experiences with the Weetigo/priest, Gabriel is able to conjure this initial pleasure and by subverting it, he derives the power that allows him to decolonize his own subjectivity. This scene delineates the path by which Gabriel subverts colonial ideologies through his ability to harness his own *mithoopoowamoowin*. Gabriel even mischievously asks Jeremiah if what Father Lafleur does to him is *machipoowamoowin* (bad dream power) (Highway 91). If he associates his abuse with *machipoowamoowin*, does it not follow that he would associate healing with *mithoopoowamoowin*?

Gabriel's abuse at the hands of Father Lafleur causes him to wonder about the possibility of a community of abused boys and a community of males who enjoy same-sex activity. During a conversation with his father, Gabriel realizes that his "education" has shattered the illusions that Christianity imposed on his family. His growing sexual awareness ejects him from the social body of his home; Gabriel realizes that "there was no place for him in Eemanapiteepitat" (109). Gabriel recognizes his ejection from Christian innocence and realizes that if he remains with his family, his expulsion from innocence and transformation into a member of a community of abject citizens will haunt him. When he recalls his last encounter with the priest, "he could still feel the old priest's meat breath, could still taste sweet honey, the hard, naked, silver body of the Son of God. Of the four hundred boys who had passed through Birch Lake during his nine years there, who couldn't smell that smell, who couldn't taste that taste?" (109). Here, it would appear that Highway ambiguously makes a correlation between semen and warm honey; but the idea of their being a communal sense of taste does not necessitate semen since it could in fact be the taste of the crucifix. Gabriel intimates that he wishes to find one of the "four hundred boys" who shared his experiences and found pleasure in them: he wishes to find a community of indigenous men who desire other men.

Before Gabriel leaves, his mother, Mariesis, gives him the portrait of the Fur Queen that he almost forgot. Highway describes how "[f]ramed in a wash of golden light, Gabriel stood, twirling in one hand—pink, mauve, purple—a bloom of fireweed. How handsome he was!" (110). The flower

symbolizes Gabriel's budding sexuality (Reder 284), and that Gabriel is ready to enter the terrain of his queer, but not-yet-Two-Spirited, sexuality. The link to fireweed and his mother's insistence that he take the portrait of the Fur Queen with him suggest that although he has been plucked from his native soil he must not forget his Cree heritage.

To illustrate Gabriel's potential for metamorphosis, upon Gabriel's arrival in Winnipeg, Highway juxtaposes the scene where the brothers cease "gnawing away with the mob" in the Polo Park Shopping Mall food-court (119-120) with a sexual encounter in the mall lavatory between Gabriel and a stranger. Just before the brothers enter the "belly of the beast," the food court, Gabriel transforms into a "rock star with a tan" (119). Gabriel's current transformation seems hardly benign given that this scene is juxtaposed with the moment when the brothers "ate so much their bellies came near to bursting. They drank so much their bladders grew pendulous" (120). Gabriel and Jeremiah consume and are consumed by the Weetigo in its manifestation as consumerism; Highway describes the food-court as the "belly of the beast" (119), and the brothers are fed on consumerism, and on the neo-imperialist/neo-colonialist commodities of Western capitalism. As the brothers consume massive amounts of food, amid a mob of "people shovelling food in and chewing and swallowing and burping," they discuss how Weesageechak destroys the Weetigo by "chewing the Weetigo's entrails to smithereens from the inside out" (120). Yet, the brothers fail to realize the irony of their current predicament, and they continue to allow the Weetigo to devour them. Gabriel's sexual identity here is intimately tied to consumerism; he does not resist or question his current subjective position and the desires that are linked to it. The neo-consumer-Gabriel can only see and desire, foreshadowing his later inability to cease his promiscuous lifestyle after discovering his HIV-positive status.

When Gabriel encounters a white man in the public washroom "holding in his hand a stalk of fireweed so pink, so mauve that Gabriel could not help but look, and seeing, desire" (121), the fireweed becomes the catalyst for Gabriel's desires. The paragraph ends with "the Cree Adonis could taste, upon the buds that lined his tongue, warm honey" (120-121), which again does not explicitly suggest that Gabriel's ingestion of "warm honey" signifies semen, but only intimates that sexual activity has occurred. When Gabriel leaves the mall and concludes the story of Weesageechak, "the image of a certain man aflame with fireweed cling[s] to his sense with pleasurable insistence" (121). Fireweed was not present in the scene in which Father Lafleur masturbated Gabriel; fireweed is associated, rather, with Gabriel's own growing sexuality and the pleasure he derives from it, but the warm honey returns him to his first orgasm: now fireweed and honey are complexly and intimately intertwined. Moreover, no longer is he the abused child, but the queer adolescent for whom same-sex desire is pleasurable. In spite of that, the sexual act here remains linked to consumerism and colonialism, especially when one notices that, as they leave the mall Highway writes, "[g]rey and soulless,

the mall loomed behind them, the rear end of a beast that, having gorged itself, expels its detritus” (121). Gabriel and Jeremiah do not understand that to destroy the Weetigo, to decolonize, they must not succumb to colonial ideologies and be the abject substance the beast “expels.” Gabriel and Jeremiah are unaware that assimilation confirms the colonial ideologies that construct indigenous traditions as inferior and not worthy of propagation.

A turning point in the novel occurs when Gabriel learns that the prostate gland is responsible for the production of semen, and the reproduction of humans, and that “without it, a male would not be male” (124). Here, by way of a pig’s dissection, Gabriel comes to understand dominant ideological views of semen (and subsequently, maleness); this moment instigates the transformation of Gabriel’s understanding of Roman Catholicism, specifically Holy Communion, from religious authority to cannibalism:

Gabriel peered closer at the miniature hunk of flesh, veins, and bone, envisioning this gland with a mystical allure. He poked around the bladder, the urethra, the genitals, amazed that such inconsequential size could hold such power...

And this is what they drink, he mused, the priests, as they celebrate Holy Communion. Male blood. He removed his eye from the pan. This is what they eat, my mother and father, as they take the body of Christ into their mouths. The essence of maleness. (125)

It is also here that Gabriel wonders why women “leave him cold as stone” (125). Two interrelated things occur at this moment. First, Gabriel comes to understand that when Catholics celebrate Holy Communion they consume “male blood...the essence of maleness” (Highway 125). Through Christ’s sacrifice Catholics attempt to imbue themselves with masculine authority in opposition to the gender-ambiguous authority Highway claims for the Fur Queen. Second, when he experiences homoerotic desires for his teacher, Gabriel can “hear Father Bouchard’s words...the union of man and woman, [is] the union of Christ and his church” (125). This association, as Wendy Pearson argues, imbricates Christianity “with misogynist violence, with homophobia, and with the rape of the New World” (“Native Narratives” 177), and, I would add, heterosexuality itself. This scene is crucial to Gabriel’s growing awareness of the decolonizing potential he holds as both gay and Cree.

Highway not only conflates Christianity with the material effects of heteronormative ideologies, but as the novel progresses Highway also unites Christianity with the monotony of normative temporality. The silver crucifix, what Henderson identifies as the “fetish...[that acts] as a vehicle for sexual activity that attempts to counter victimization and the loss of memory” (191), begins to haunt him outside of his sexual activities. While waiting in his brother’s apartment, Gabriel is driven insane by the “*tick-tock, tick...*” of the metronome and ponders the meaning of the swinging silver crucifix: “Gabriel could see the *pendulous* silver crucifix across the breast of the priest’s black cassock. What was it about the naked man

nailed to that beam of wood that caused his pulsating restlessness?” (Highway 129; emphasis added). Highway melds normative time, the time of the capitalist clock that monitors every second, with sexual abuse. Maintaining this temporality becomes tantamount to prison for Gabriel and he has to escape to a bar, *The Hell Hotel*. Highway draws attention to the fact that Gabriel’s relation to time shifts after he becomes drunk with Wayne, or Dwayne: “[t]ime oozed into a haze of pleasurable pulsation” (131); pleasurable time, or queer time, becomes an undifferentiated haze for Gabriel and it appears as though Gabriel has ascended into the realm of dreams: “[h]is jacket was opened, his T-shirt pulled up, his zipper pulled down, his maleness flailed. The cold November air was like a spike rammed through the hand—his feet floated above the earth—and he saw mauve and pink and purple of fireweed and he tasted, on the buds that lined his tongue, the essence of warm honey” (132). Why are there floating visions of fireweed and warm honey in the back alleys of Winnipeg—what purpose does this passage serve? Gabriel’s “maleness [is] flailed” or exposed to the cold November air, and it his partner performing fellatio on him; it is the pleasure he receives from the melding of past and present that overpowers Gabriel’s inebriation and propels him into the Cree Land of Dreams.

Gabriel must accept both his Cree identity and his sexual identity to have the power to defeat the Weetigo and decolonize himself, though. Before he loses himself to the throes of passion, he witnesses the rape of the Cree woman, Madeline Jeanette Lavoix, and does nothing (132), unlike Jeremiah, who upon realizing he is a potential witness in the rape of Evelyn Rose MacCrae contacts the police, who ultimately ignore him. This is a very problematic moment for Gabriel; he is a witness to rape and could provide the police with evidence, but to admit he saw something could lead to a questioning of his own activities, whereas Jeremiah was not worried that his own actions would be questioned. For Gabriel, though, it is more than just being Cree, it is also about identifying with Lavoix as a victim of sexual assault. Rather than face the reality of the predicament they are both in as violated Cree people, Gabriel behaves quite irresponsibly. Henderson notes that Madeline Jeanette Lavoix and Evelyn Rose MacCrae “are unwelcome, uncanny reminders of the young men’s own sexual victimization” (197). Henderson suggests: “Highway’s use of the trope of rape carries with it a model of harm that implies the contamination of an original state not just of integrity but of purity” (197). For Henderson it becomes impossible to return to a pure, precolonial past; yet, the idea that there is or was such a time is problematic. A pure, precolonial past presumes a state of innocence and an unquestionably, wholesome existence, which is not to infer that colonialism was or is beneficial, but that there was an Edenic, virgin state pre-contact with other nations. Nonetheless, I maintain that the bodies of the women that haunt the brothers suggest that, although Gabriel has accessed a Cree temporality, in the text, the Cree cultural past is sullied by the inability of

Cree individuals to help each other. Although he may find a sense of pride, that pride can easily turn back into shame.

A pivotal moment of fabulousness occurs when Gabriel, continuing his sexual explorations, encounters a manifestation of the Fur Queen at a gay bar, *The Rose*, because it is here that the Fur Queen appears as the Native Two-Spirit. Highway does not use the term Two-Spirit in the text (perhaps due to the text's narrative timeline existing prior to the term's creation) and although Terry Goldie and others have applied the term, perhaps hastily, I wish to stipulate why this figure is a Two-Spirit, despite the absence of the term in the novel. In his analysis of the potential interaction between queer and native studies, scholar Qwo-Li Driskill writes, the "*Two-Spirit* places *gendered* identities and experiences at the centre of discussion" ("Doubleweaving," 73; second emphasis added). When Gabriel encounters "the only other Indian in the room [at *The Rose*]," he immediately comments upon this person's gendered embodiment and does not consider sexual orientation: "he was neither male nor female. Or perhaps both" (Highway 168). Initially he finds this person "disturbing," but, as "his eyes remained hostage" (168), he comes to accept this person. As Gabriel continues to watch the figure, Gabriel begins to believe that "he-she" is attempting to baptize him "with sprays of holy water," and "he-she" becomes "a sorceress, a priestess, clandestinely reviving a sacrament from some dangerous religion" (168). Highway's diction is pertinent. This figure is not a witch, as Gabriel has been taught to perceive Chachagathoo (the last medicine woman to oppose Christianity); this gender-ambiguous figure is a "sorceress, a priestess," two titles that do not carry the same negative connotations as a "witch." Moreover, he-she is "clandestinely reviving a sacrament from some dangerous religion"; he-she is secretly transferring to Gabriel the subversive, alchemical power Gabriel requires. Notably, Driskill further posits that "*Two-Spirit* asserts ceremonial and spiritual communities and traditions and relationships with medicine as central to constituting various identities" ("Doubleweaving," 73). Hence, it appears that Highway is invoking the image of the Two-Spirit to provide Gabriel with the information necessary for his decolonization. In fact, this intertribal term and identity are remarkably similar to Highway's Fur Queen; his destiny is to become her physical vessel. This is where Highway's intervention and fabulousness come into play most prominently, because the text is more concerned with sexuality than it is with the construction of gender identity: sexual violence, not gender violence, is at the crux of the narrative, and neither Gabriel nor Jeremiah appears to wish to negate his masculinity.<sup>3</sup>

Astonishingly, as Gabriel participates in an orgy after his encounter with the Two-Spirit, time again alters and "had passed through him" so that his memory of the orgy is vague and hazy. As multiple men puncture his orifices, "somewhere in the farthest reaches of his senses, the silver cross oozed in and out, in and out, the naked body pressing on his lips, positioning itself for entry. Until, upon the buds that lined his tongue,

warm honey flowed” (Highway 168-169). The memory of his initial abuse, where Highway does not explicitly write that Gabriel was penetrated orally or anally, is here juxtaposed to a moment where Gabriel’s body is explicitly penetrated; the crucifix, however, which did penetrate Gabriel’s mouth as a child, is only able to position itself for entry. The crucifix attempts to enter—Christianity attempts to reassert its hold over Gabriel’s budding Two-Spirited consciousness—but Gabriel experiences the essence of “warm honey” before it does; another man may have ejaculated into his mouth, thereby actualizing the metaphor for warm honey as semen: thus, the memory has been altered. Gabriel is performing, perhaps unconsciously, the queer healing that Ann Cvetkovich articulates:

The subversive potentialities of repetition with a difference which have been valorized in discussions of butch-femme, drag, and other queer cultural practices, therefore provide the basis for healing rituals and performances... [it is] a queer healing practice [that] would turn negative affect or trauma on its head, but by embracing rather than refusing it. (88-89)

After his “baptism” by the Two-Spirit, whether Gabriel fully realizes it or not, he is able to find pleasure outside the full repetition of his abuse at the hands of Father Lafleur. This change enables Gabriel to recognize that although the past informs the present, he is not doomed to repeat and live in the past as though it were immutable.

Because the Fur Queen in the guise of the Two-Spirit has baptized Gabriel, he is now capable of transforming his status as abject and ejected subject by embracing the fabulous Two-Spiritedness that Highway constructs for him. Gabriel discards the cannibalism of the communion and confronts Jeremiah with the truth: Christians are “savage” and are the ones who engage in cannibalism (Highway 184). Gabriel comes to enjoy subverting the authority and sacredness of Christian discourse; when Jeremiah asks how to say university in Cree, a grinning Gabriel says, “*Semen-airy*,” allowing “the word [to flood] his palate like a surge of honey” (191; original emphasis). The conflation of semen as warm honey in the orgy now allows Gabriel to access the pleasures accorded to “warm honey” through references to the consumption of semen. In addition, as Gabriel comes to embrace his Cree heritage and queer sexuality—in short, his Two-Spiritedness—colonial ideologies come to signify abjection. After taking communion, Gabriel bursts out laughing and flees the church with “his mouth spewing blood, his bloated gut regurgitant, his esophagus engorged with entrails” (181). Gabriel’s body rejects the body of Christ because Gabriel now derives power from outside dominant discursive regimes. Gabriel effectively metamorphoses into a Two-Spirit individual, and when Christianity and colonialism come close to him, and threaten the boundary he has created, his body reacts with emesis. When Jeremiah defends the Church and attacks Gabriel for his blasphemy, Gabriel draws attention to the symbolism inherent in Holy Communion: “Christianity asks people to eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood—shit, Jeremiah, eating human flesh, that’s *cannibalism*. What could be more savage—?”

(184; original emphasis). Gabriel no longer needs a trigger to tap into his fabulousness; Gabriel embraces his homosexuality and finds pleasure in it because he accepts his Cree identity, which allows him to conjure a discursive position that is neither heteronormative nor colonial. Through his encounter with the Two-Spirit, and through “repetition with a difference” Gabriel is able to acknowledge that, while he was abused, he should not feel ashamed for deriving pleasure from the abuse.

The last instance in which Highway uses “honey” in reference to Gabriel occurs when he is putting on his shaman make-up for a performance of *Ulysses Thunderchild*, the play that he and Jeremiah create together to expose the realities of colonialism and their sexual abuse at the hands of Father Lafleur. This moment occurs after he has acquired AIDS: “[w]hen he arrived at that now familiar blemish on the right side of his neck, he brushed it over with honey-beige base until the purplish red could pass for a hickey” (283). Although Gabriel now embraces his Two-Spiritedness, he must now draw upon the power of “the eyebrow pencils, the make-up—magic weapons of a shaman, a weaver of spells” to create the illusion that he is physically healthy (302). The artifice of a fabulous reality comes into full force here; while Gabriel is content with himself, the reality of HIV/AIDS demands that Gabriel maintain an illusion of perfect health in order to survive in the Canadian social body. For Gabriel the disease further intensifies the manner in which external forces penetrate and control his body; his abject status intensifies with the fear that what he carries within him is a dangerous, contagious infection. Although Gabriel appears as the sacrificial lamb that must die to empower the heterosexual hero, Gabriel is not a passive victim; until his dying moments, Gabriel actively resists the forces of the Weetigo and colonialism, allowing his fabulosity to act pedagogically for Jeremiah.

Before Gabriel dies, he comes to understand what it means to exist outside a Western ideological frame, and more important, he is able to communicate his understanding of this to Jeremiah. Leading up to his final encounter with the Weetigo, Gabriel asserts that like his father, upon his death, he will be greeted by

Weesageechak for sure. The clown who bridges humanity and God—a God who laughs, a God who’s here, not for guilt, not for suffering, but for a good time. Except, this time, the Trickster representing God as a woman, a goddess in fur. Like this picture. I’ve always thought that, ever since we were little kids. I mean, if Native languages have no gender, then why should we? And why, for that matter, should God? (298)

Gabriel vocalizes his Two-Spiritedness and asserts his similarity to the Fur Queen; he embodies her essence and abilities, which provide him with the necessary fabulousness or *mithoopoowamoowin* to defeat the Weetigo only moments later in the text. Furthermore, her “kiss” to Abraham opens the narrative and her “kiss” to the deceased Gabriel closes the narrative; she gives and takes life for the Okimasises. After aligning himself with the essence of the Fur Queen, Gabriel comes to embody a queer appropriation

of the vagina dentata, suggesting that Gabriel ascends into a subjectivity powerful enough to castrate the phallic Weetigo/priest. Gabriel's mouth emblemizes the vagina dentata because he is able to assert his own identity, and his own pleasure, by speaking in Cree. Gabriel comes to act upon the realization that he made earlier in the novel: "if *machipoowamoowin*, bad dream power, was obviously powerful enough to snuff out a human life, then would not *mithoopoowamoowin*, good dream power, be as strong?" (247). In Gabriel's last encounter with the Weetigo he destroys it:

The Weetigo came at Gabriel with its tongue lolling, its claws reaching for his groin.

'Haven't you feasted on enough human flesh while we sit here with nothing but our tongues to chew on?' Hissed Gabriel. But the cannibal spirit now had the face of Father Roland Lafleur. Gabriel crept towards the holy man. 'But I haven't eaten meat in weeks, my dear *Sagweesoo*,' Gabriel whined, and flicked his tongue at the old priest's groin. 'Don't move away.'

The creature lunged at Gabriel, brandishing a crucifix.

'Get away from me,' Gabriel thrashed. 'Get away, *awus* [go away]!' (299-300)

When the Weetigo brandishes a crucifix at Gabriel for flicking "his tongue at the old priest's groin," he is able to cast the priest away when he demands, "Get away, *awus*!" (299-300). When Gabriel demands that the priest leave, he does so in Cree, the language he was forbidden to use as a child. Through his exorcism of the Weetigo, Gabriel is able to abject Christianity and acknowledges the abuses done to him, not as "the right of holy men," but the actions of a beast (Highway 78). Through his *mithoopoowamoowin*, Gabriel is able to destroy the Weetigo and all that it represents, so that Jeremiah in turn will be able to defend Gabriel's right to an indigenous death ritual. The Weetigo does not appear again in the text, and when a priest attempts to enter Gabriel's room, Jeremiah proudly stands by Ann-Adele Ghost rider, an Ojibway medicine woman, and asserts, "We're Indians! We have a right to conduct our own religious ceremonies, just like everyone else!" (305). Jeremiah learns from Gabriel's fabulous expulsion of the Weetigo that he, too, can personify fabulosity and refuses the priest entry. The Fabulous is not the sole property of any individual, and although Gabriel is the first of the brothers to manifest it, Jeremiah proves that he is able to learn from his brother and harness his own *mithoopoowamoowin*.

The narrative comes full circle with Gabriel's death. As he lies dying, the Fur Queen approaches him, kisses him and transports him to the land of dreams:

And then the Queen's lips descended. Down they came, fluttering, like a leaf from an autumn tree, until they came to rest if only for a moment, though he wanted it to last a thousand years, on Gabriel Okimasis's left cheek. There. She kissed him. And took him by the hand. (306)

There is no description of where they go, and images of both honey and fireweed are absent from Gabriel's departure. The land of dreams to which Gabriel departs is unknowable and, presumably, he can now experience pleasure the likes of which he has never been able to access through fireweed and honey. Gabriel will live on through Jeremiah and the work he did as a dancer, and his death will provide Jeremiah with the strength necessary to continue the process of his decolonization. What Goldie calls Gabriel's "triumphant embrace of indulgent gay sexuality and Native values" (216) reveals that this text crosses the boundaries of both Native and queer literature: it is Two-Spirit literature. The text illustrates the ability of apparently abject citizens to assert the legitimacy of their own narratives, and to reclaim and change the course of the narratives told about them.

### Notes

1. The *vagina dentata* is a literary motif representing male fears of castration. Some of the most popular examples are the Medusa, who attracts and repels, and the vampire, who since the nineteenth-century has come to signify dangerous sexuality. See Creed for an analysis of contemporary representations of the *vagina dentata* in horror films.

2. See Goldie for an analysis of the complications surrounding pedophilia and homosexual identity formation in this scene.

3. See Henderson for a more detailed analysis of the ways in which the text privileges sexuality over gender-identity.

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