

“WITH THESE MAGIC WEAPONS, MAKE A NEW WORLD”: INDIGENOUS CENTERED URBANISM IN TOMSON HIGHWAY’S *KISS OF THE FUR QUEEN*

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Abstract / Résumé

The essay seeks to theorize contemporary urban Indigenous literature through the analysis of Tomson Highway’s 1998 novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Highway’s text is discussed within the contexts of Canadian federal Indian policy, the residential school system, the foster care system, and concerns for social justice that emerge from these legacies. Unlike other urban Native novels, Highway’s text links the possibilities for asserting an artistic life in the city with Cree cosmology and language, in effect diverting the consumerist purposes of urban locations and claiming them within a Cree worldview, ultimately resisting assimilation and offering a portrait of transnational, Indigenized urban space.

L'article cherche à élaborer une théorie de la littérature autochtone urbaine de notre époque par l'analyse du roman de Tomson Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (*Champion et Ooneemeetoo* en traduction française), publié en 1998. L'auteure discute du roman dans le contexte de la politique du gouvernement canadien relativement aux Indiens, du système des pensionnats autochtones, du système de placement familial et des préoccupations en matière de justice sociale qui proviennent de tels legs. Contrairement à d'autres romans autochtones urbains, le texte de Highway lie la possibilité de créer une vie artistique dans la ville à la cosmologie et à la langue crie. Il détourne ainsi les objectifs de consommation des lieux urbains et les réclame au sein d'une vision du monde crie afin de résister ultimement à l'assimilation et de proposer un portrait d'un espace urbain indigénisé et transnational.

For scholars of Indigenous studies who seek to develop ethically responsible and Indigenous-centered methodologies, galvanized in no small measure by Craig Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999), the appropriate parameters for engaging with urban Indian literatures can seem unclear. Part of this ambivalence stems from the ways in which concepts such as "hybridity," "transnationalism," and "globalism" have been applied to cosmopolitan, urban environments that are marked by flows and encounters of various peoples across all manner of boundaries, including national, linguistic, and racial boundaries. In effect, the "postcolonial" city itself, in its emergence as a kind of ever-accelerating global space, may thus seem to challenge nationalisms that are politically and culturally centered in rural or reservation environments that are fairly isolated from cities. One thereby wonders if nationalist frameworks for Indigenous literary criticism are congruent with urban Indian studies, of which pan-Indian and cross-border movements are essential components. This essay seeks to resolve this apparent discrepancy, marking an evolution in literary depictions of urban Indigenous people, offering a transnationalist but Indigenous-centered approach, and finally advancing that approach through a reading of Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998).

I.

The importance of environment, specifically land rights, to Native people's exercise of cultural and political sovereignty has received much critical attention. Understandably, this emphasis on the natural world is most often documented and creatively apparent in references to rural or reservation locations. In these places, Native peoples are perceived to be separate from mainstream society and isolated in environments that are invested with spiritual significance for them. For the most part, these places are conceived to be their only truly comfortable homes, and as a result, urban environments have not been explored as having any particular cultural force or relevance for Indigenous-centered narratives or for scholarship. Because studies of urban Indigenous literatures are relatively rare, Indigenous-centered models for this material—or theoretical frameworks of any kind—have not been explored thoroughly.

It is doubtful that the lack of critical attention to urban Indigenous narratives and experiences is due to little interest; after all, many Indigenous peoples in North America and across the globe live in cities. Instead, urban Indigenous experiences have been associated in literature (and also in "real life") with cultural ambivalence, usually accompanied by "hybrid" or mixed-blood identities, which, if not leading to tragedy, lead to flight from urban locations. In the afterword to his text *Our Fire*

Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History (2006), Daniel Heath Justice describes typical portrayals of hybrid identity in the following way:

These blood burdens have been seized upon as *the* defining feature of Native identity by many critics and no small number of Indian writers themselves. In this model, to be fully Indian one must apparently suffer the agonies of mixed-blood angst; Indianness can thus exist only through the fragmentation of the Indian self by Whiteness. It's a particularly sadistic (sometimes masochistic) variant of the Vanishing Indian. (212)

Mixed-blood identity, it seems, has typically been a marker of cultural weakness and disconnection, an existence that must somehow be overcome to avoid psychological ruin. One might add to this characterization of hybrid identity a physical removal or dislocation from the home place (usually a reservation) that is manifest as environmentally and usually spiritually problematic as well.

Indigenous-authored texts that have received the most critical acclaim, especially those from the 1960s and 1970s, including N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), explore this sense of dislocation as primary to the recuperation of cultural affiliation for their protagonists. The novels emphasize reservation over urban experiences, especially the religious importance of returning to these locations after time overseas and/or in cities. William Bevis calls this phenomenon "homing in," explaining, "In Native American novels, coming home, staying put...is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good" (582). Based on narratives such as these, readers may thereby conclude that espousing authentic Native identity necessitates living in a predominantly Indigenous community, usually on a reservation, and rejecting urbanization, which is often equated with assimilation.

This conclusion is incomplete, however, because of the importance of urban experiences to recent Indigenous literatures, which portray cityscapes in an evolving light. As Isabel Schneider describes, beginning in the 1980s, Native American texts, especially works by Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, started to portray more middle-class, professional, urban Indigenous characters. However, though succeeding in mainstream society, these characters "share a vague discomfort with regard to their achievements" (292) and eventually, as Louis Owens puts it, turn "back toward an Indian identity and away from the collective dream of White America" (qtd. in Schneider 292). Ultimately then, these narratives display the same kind of "homing" consciousness, even if not

involving permanent return home, that was typical of earlier texts. Schneider continues to trace this depiction of urban characters in newer texts, the characters of which, though generally still constructing identities that are “non-Western and tribal” (295), retain strong connections to home communities and are more comfortable than earlier protagonists in the “in-between” life of urban Indigenous identity.

This “in-between” characterization of urban Indigenous experiences, often coupled with cross-racial encounters and identities, is thus central to the ways that many scholars and community members articulate life away from predominately Indigenous communities, and, though urbanization and racial and cultural mixture are common, they still nonetheless retain associations with separation from Indigenous culture and even fragmented identity. Though Justice disagrees with privileging this racial or cultural hybridity as the definitive experience of Indigenous identity, he does not suggest that Indigenous peoples with multiple ancestries should be relegated to the peripheries of their communities or of Indigenous-centered scholarship. Rather, he critiques methodological emphases on hybridity to the exclusion of nationally based community affiliations and responsibilities—for writers as well as scholars. He explains,

The concept that identities are both stable and in constant motion is hardly debatable in Indigenous contexts...the idea that identities are conditional and influenced by social contexts isn't particularly alien to Indigenous epistemologies, given historical and contemporary kinship relationships.... Yet when Indigenous scholars assert a critical scholarship that draws from specific cultural contexts that privilege a distinctive Indigenous nationhood (and which are understood to be influenced by the above realities), we're variously condemned, dismissed, or simply pitied.... To state that the significance of our culturally rooted intellectual traditions is in some way less valid than the assimilative universalism of traditional Eurowestern scholarship is an exercise intrinsically linked to the intellectual, political, and economic colonization of the Americas. (213)

As Justice outlines, though literary depictions and studies of hybridity have often fed notions of Indigenous alienation or even fueled colonialism, one must not conclude from these assertions that a kind of cosmopolitanism within and amongst Native communities is itself the problem or even anything new.

What is new, perhaps, is the way in which several contemporary Indigenous authors and filmmakers—among them Greg Sarris, Susan

Power, Sherman Alexie, Sterlin Harjo, and Tomson Highway—have signaled a shift in depictions of urban Indigenous experiences away from the preoccupation with alienation that Justice describes above. This shift unsettles some apparent “givens” in studies of Indigenous identities, experiences, and environments, and though it does not discount the need for nationalist methodologies, it does call for new theoretical discussions of Indigenous cosmopolitanism in ways that expand nationalism beyond rural and reservation “homing” or “in-between” urban ambivalence and articulate more thorough understandings of political, cultural, and personal sovereignty, even in unexpected surroundings.

II.

Considering Indigenous cosmopolitanism in particularly urban spaces certainly connects to theories of hybridization that form much of the basis of postcolonial writings such as those by Gloria Anzaldúa, Homi Bhabha, and Paul Gilroy. However, contemporary urban Indigenous literature accomplishes something beyond or at least in addition to an imagining of cultural mixture or diasporic experience, buoying nationalistic political aims within community – specific cultural frameworks while also incorporating other nationalities into that model. In this way, this literature moves beyond a totalizing framework of cultural mixture or mediated cultural construction to a kind of transnationalist Indigeneity, which reveals that human flows across borders, in politics, landscape, and culture, are not prohibitive of national identities associated with tribal homelands. Importantly, this understanding of cosmopolitan Indigeneity has implications for urban space itself, as Indigenous writers reclaim cityscapes for their communities and undercut commodification of Indigenous iconography for “civilizing” purposes.

As Indigenous studies scholars and members of Native communities well know, the basic framework for postcolonial theory is not an easy fit for Aboriginal and Native American literatures. Most simply, there is no “post” to the colonized status of Indigenous nations within North America. As Jace Weaver explains in *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (1997), “American Natives...remain colonized, suffering from internal colonialism” (10). Weaver names the terms “internal colonialism,” “settler colonialism,” and “paracolonialism,” attributable to Robert Thomas, Edward Said, and Gerald Vizenor, respectively, as applicable to the status of American Indigenous, who are comparable to Palestinian, Maori, and Australian Aboriginal populations because of their occupation of shared geographies with the *métropole* (10). Because of this shared space, the features of postcolonial literatures that are usually regarded as truly liberative, such

as total rejection of the colonizer's language, religion, and political structure, are particularly challenging for and usually absent from Indigenous literatures. As Weaver points out, many recent scholars of diasporic literatures, including Homi Bhabha, reject this "either-or" proposition anyway, pointing toward the fecund possibilities of middle ground. However, though this exploration of middle space is certainly productive, for North American Indigenous peoples, experiences of diaspora differ from those of many other peoples around the world.

Though Indigenous communities certainly have experienced the trauma of removal from ancestral homelands, of forced relocation in the nineteenth century and of voluntary—though in many cases problematic—relocation to cities in the twentieth century, the relationships between diasporic North American Indigenous peoples and their homelands (in many forms) are formulated through more than memory; they remain intimate, active, and within shared continental bounds. Drawing on but finding difference with the concerns of postcolonial literature, Weaver thus outlines his emphasis on community. He explains, "Not to be committed to Native American community, affirming the tribes, the people, the values, is tantamount to psychic suicide. It is to lose the self in the dominant mass humanity, either ceasing to be or persisting merely as another ethnic minority, drifting with no place, no relations, no real people" (43). He goes on to coin the word "communitism," beyond notions of racial or cultural authenticity, as the distinguishing feature of Native American literature of resistance, and defines the term in the following way: "It is formed from a combination of the words 'community' and 'activism' or 'activist.' Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community, including the wider community" (43). Most can agree on this primacy of community to lived experience as well as its evocation in literature. How that community is—or should be—constructed is murkier.

Weaver's marriage of community and activism is certainly in evidence in urban Indigenous communities, which have galvanized much of contemporary Indigenous activist movements in cities such as Minneapolis, the site of the American Indian Movement's founding in 1968; San Francisco, the location of the seizure of Alcatraz Island in 1969; and Ottawa, the site of the founding of the Congress for Aboriginal Peoples (representing off-reserve, status, non-status, and Métis peoples) in 1971. Such urban Native communities increased in the United States in the mid twentieth century because of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Indian Relocation Program, which was begun in 1948 and lasted until at least 1979 (BIA 3). Similarly, developments in Canadian Indian policy, primarily revealed in continual contemporary amendments to the 1867 Indian

Act, the centerpiece of Canadian Indian law, echo this program. According to Roy Todd, Canadian Aboriginal urbanization spiked in the 1960s, accompanying Canadian urbanization as a whole but revealing certain characteristics among migrants: they were mostly women, younger than the general population, less well educated, economically disadvantaged, and highly impoverished (95-7). These newcomers to urban areas cited family and health issues (including escape from abuse), need for housing and employment, access to education, and forced relocation, as well as loss of legal Indian status as reasons for coming to cities, and in a parallel to the BIA relocation program, Todd notes that state initiatives to encourage Aboriginal relocation to Canadian cities dove-tailed with these social needs¹ (96-7).

By either directly or indirectly relocating Native people, the United States and Canada sought to lessen the economic dependence of Indigenous populations on their federal governments and weaken strong communities. These assimilationist projects did succeed in modifying Indigenous peoples' relationships to their geographies, accelerating urbanization that was transforming North America as a whole after World War II. But though the U.S. and Canadian governments tried to scatter relocatees across cities and prevent them from concentrating in any one neighborhood, these Indigenous city-dwellers nonetheless found each other.

Current incarnations of urban Indigenous enclaves thus now proliferate in North America. Renya Ramirez's recent book, *Native Hubs: Culture, Community, and Belonging in Silicon Valley and Beyond* (2007), provides an ethnographic account of urban Indigenous communities in northern California. According to Ramirez, urban Natives conceive of themselves as parts of "hubs," communities that are away from but connected to traditional homelands. These hubs foster a sense of belonging as well as cross-cultural alliance for urban Indigenes, allowing them ultimately to reinscribe hegemonic space (96-7). But this hub-making is not without its challenges in relation to Indigenous political structures. As Ramirez documents, many Indigenous Californians, mostly urban Natives, are unable to take advantage of services provided in or participate in elections held on traditional homelands, and many groups centered in urban areas have not been granted federal recognition as Indigenous nations. Among urban Native people, these circumstances sometimes compromise the sense of communitism relative to these homelands but often spur a unique sense of communitism within urban space itself.

Many of the same circumstances and concerns apply to Aboriginal peoples in Canadian cities. In her book *"Real" Indians and Others: Mixed-*

Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood (2004), Bonita Lawrence likewise documents the development of urban Indigenous communities, demonstrating ways in which, in a Canadian context, policies forcing assimilation, specifically the practice of “enfranchisement,”² have robbed Aboriginal peoples of their legal Indian status and rights to lands and services, contributing to an influx of non-status Native people into cities (31). As Lawrence explains, the particular legal separation from Indigenous communities that most Canadian urban Indigenes, especially women, have experienced creates a certain permanency of urban dwelling, which in turn spurs urgent need for community centers and Native organizations that actively promote Indigenous cultures within cities (159). On the other hand, according to Pauline Comeau and Aldo Santin, the enactment of Bill C-31 in 1985, which restored Indian status to women and their descendents who had been divested of membership in their bands due to intermarriage, created another development in Aboriginal peoples’ relationships to cities (60). Similar to the hub phenomenon that Ramirez describes, an increasingly “hypermobile” Aboriginal population has developed (61). These individuals move between two home bases: the city in the winter (where heat and running water better allow for survival) and the reserve in summer (where fishing and hunting better supplement welfare than meager to non-existent employment can). Because of this current hypermobility, Canadian cities such as Winnipeg have indeterminate and fluctuating numbers of Indigenous residents, creating debate about whether the federal government, provincial governments, or experimental urban centers of self-government should be responsible for Aboriginal city dwellers (61-2).

Along with understanding the functions and characteristics of these urban communities, considering the ways that members of these communities inhabit their urban environments, or more specifically, conceive of their relationships to their cityscapes, is significant for theorizing the experiences depicted in urban Indigenous literature. Most such attempts to theorize urban space culturally have been made by Henri Lefebvre, a neo-Marxist critic, and Edward Soja, a postmodern geographer who has expanded upon much of Lefebvre’s work. Revealing his Marxist orientation, in “The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Social Space” (1968), Lefebvre advances his view of the city as based upon the requirements of industrialization constantly to create workers to serve its production of commodities. A new unity of industrialization and urbanization is born, managed by planners (eventually entrepreneurs, as Lefebvre argues in *Urban Revolution* (1970)), who speak of “urbanism,” a new ideology. Through this union, class issues are wedded with urbanism, which is put into practice and visible on the landscape (70).

Specifically focusing on the city of Los Angeles in much of his work, Soja extends Lefebvre's analysis, including more attention in writings such as *Postmodern Geographies* (1999) to cultural and identity difference as expressed through race, class, and gender, and articulating how social life is spatial, inscribed with relations of power (6).

Using these studies as bases for urban Indigenous theory poses some challenges as well as possibilities. In their Marxist outlook, these critics perceive class dynamics and their relationships to industrialization (which is eventually subsumed by urbanization) as fundamental and primary among means of understanding societies and grouping the humans that comprise them. For Indigenous peoples, this grouping according to class of course resonates; the economic disenfranchisement of Native peoples, especially in cities, is well recognized. However, as Justice asserts, Indigenous peoples, whether or not they espouse multiple ancestries or diverse backgrounds, over and above relationships based on capital, actively and primarily affirm kinship relationships to their Indigenous communities, which have political force outside of the impact of the "state." In Justice's words, "Hybridity is all the rage, but the political expression of *peoplehood* remains the central principle of Indian literatures" (214). Likewise, Marxist scholarship is based in notions that histories of civilizations are advancing along a series of modes of production. This lens necessitates a universal approach; though more than one mode of production might coexist within a given country, all civilizations are on the same political and economic track. Within these modes of production, many Indigenous enterprises would be classified as "primitive" or part of a less advanced, "Asiatic" mode of production. Of course, Aboriginal communities themselves have developed thriving capitalistic structures, but these are enacted often with communitarian drive, complicating Marx's framework. Because much postcolonial criticism derives out of Marxist theory, some of the difficulties of applying its universal claims to Indigenous studies are thus even more apparent.

On the other hand, the focus in the works of Lefebvre and Soja on the commodification of urban space and/or iconography to inscribe relations of power is one that is of particular interest for understanding Indigenous writers' depictions of cityscapes. Indigenous governments have a stake in what happens in cities for many reasons: large numbers of members are located there; negotiations with provincial, state, and federal governments usually occur there; and cities often span traditional Indigenous homelands, which, in their natural features, may have spiritual and historical significance. In his book *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* (2008), Coll Thrush emphasizes within a framework of "place stories" the centrality of Indigenous communities

to the founding and development of the city of Seattle and uncovers ways in which these communities demonstrate an urban sense of Indigenous identity, which he calls “cosmopolitan Indianness” (112). Importantly, Thrush exposes the city’s appropriation of Indigenous images to advance a colonial narrative of itself, ironically through plans to gentrify neighborhoods and even dislocate Indigenous inhabitants. The means by which authors (such as Sherman Alexie in his rendering of Seattle) illustrate and reclaim these features of the cityscape for their Indigenous communities is, it seems, key to understanding nation-centered urban Indigeneity.

In seeking an ethical theoretical framework for urban Indigenous literatures, scholars may draw upon previous work in Indigenous as well as postcolonial, Marxist, and postmodern theory, recognizing the problems of various angles but keeping the many distinct circumstances, histories, and national identities of Native peoples who inhabit cities at the forefront. Through an overview of these concerns, this study offers an approach that is transnational and not in-between, communitist as well as cosmopolitan, and subversive in its challenge to commodified, colonizing formulations of urban space.

III.

Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* evokes identity that is not Aboriginal, consciousness once-removed from a more traditional Native place, but instead is firmly grounded on the cityscape, a center for Indigenous creativity, community-building, and activism. Highway, who is Cree, locates an urban Indigeneity that does not retain the same enduring ties with reservations that are common in earlier Native texts. Throughout his novel, Highway develops an urban-centered sense of Native place. Through his creation of an urban setting, Highway complicates the “homing in” theme of canonical American Indian texts, suggesting that for his characters, fulfillment comes not from an in-between Cree identity, but rather from locating and transforming Cree identity within the city.

Highway’s novel, which parallels many events in the author’s own life, reflects the legacies of Canada’s varied Aboriginal peoples—Métis, Inuit, status and non-status Indigenous—who have experienced relocation in several historical contexts, those created through colonial actions of the Canadian government, missionary and assimilationist aims of the Roman Catholic Church and other religious organizations, and economic circumstances, often dire, of Aboriginal communities themselves. According to Lawrence, because of its unique relationship to the British empire, Canada pursued different means of colonizing Indigenous nations than those that the United States employed. She explains that

as a new, independent republic, the U.S. could not assert “direct colonial control” over Native nations and resorted instead initially to violence and warfare and later to legislation in order to separate Natives from their lands and steadily undermine Indigenous self-government (7). By contrast, Canada was able to administer colonial control as a settler state of a global empire, asserting definitions of Aboriginal identity from the start in “its highly divisive manner of externalizing ‘half-breeds’ and creating patriarchal divisions within Native communities, which automatically ‘bled off’ people from their communities without the need for other policies of removal” (7). Historically, the Indian Act has outlined the Canadian government’s relations with Aboriginal communities, giving it exclusive authority to legislate concerning Indigenous peoples within its national boundaries, to define Indianness and legal Indian status, and to lay out assimilationist policies (31). In the early twentieth century, demands for greater access to and control of Aboriginal lands was apparent in amendments to the Indian Act that allowed Aboriginal people to be removed from reserves near towns and, as part of amendments in 1911 to the Indian Act (known collectively as the Oliver Act), allowed cities and companies to expropriate parts of reserve lands, even going so far as moving an entire reserve away from a town, for the purposes of building transportation infrastructure and public works (Macklem 4-5).

The most notorious of the Canadian government’s assimilationist policies directed at Aboriginal peoples came in the form of the residential school system, in which Tomson Highway and his brother René participated. As those who have studied Indian boarding schools well know, this project, like parallel efforts in the States, Australia, and elsewhere, resulted in widespread abuse of Indigenous young people who were separated from their families and institutionalized far away from their reserves. John Milloy, in his comprehensive *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (1999), details the many failures of the system, including poorly maintained and dangerous buildings, insufficient keeping of health regulations, deficient medical services, and severe and unfamiliar pedagogies (77). These problems led to a high number of deaths, not to mention psychological and physical illness, among scores of Aboriginal youth. Beyond these major faults, the most harrowing aspect of the residential school system was physical, including sexual abuse, which was widely exposed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to Milloy, greater attention to these conditions made evident the connection between the schools and dysfunction in Aboriginal communities, namely child abuse, and lawsuits followed, prompting an official government plan for recon-

ciliation in 1998 (298, 304-5).

The aim of the residential school system to sever the ties of Aboriginal youth to their Indigenous communities was mirrored in an additional, more contemporary removal project to which Tomson Highway was also subjected during his adolescence in southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba (McKegney 37). Beginning in 1951 and extending to the 1980s, a common practice among Canadian child welfare agencies was to remove Indigenous children from their families and place them in the foster care system, a phenomenon that Patrick Johnston calls the "Sixties Scoop" (27). Collecting first-hand accounts of this phenomenon, Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey, in *Stolen from our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities* (1997), document the sudden and secretive ways in which children were separated, some permanently, from their parents and siblings and delivered usually to unwelcoming non-Native parents. Crey recounts that in accordance with jurisdiction given to them by the federal government, Canadian social workers determined "proper care" based on White, middle-class cultural mandates and, as they did to countless other Aboriginal women, deemed Crey's impoverished mother unfit. They then abducted Crey from his caring home and separated him from his sisters and brothers (30). The results of just such acts, institutionalized in provincial child welfare laws, were losses of cultural identity, Indian status, and specific band association, and in many cases, unawareness of birth names or parental identities (81). Within non-Native foster and adoptive homes, as in the residential school system, sexual abuse became epidemic, which connects to psychological and social struggles that many urban Aboriginal peoples continue to face (121). Discussing the Aboriginal teen street population of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Fournier and Crey state that according to social workers there, "about 85 percent of these former foster kids have been sexually abused.... In 'Boystown,' the young male prostitutes' territory..., more than 70 percent of the 'hookers' are Aboriginal boys fleeing sexual abuse at home and the strong aversion to homosexuality in aboriginal communities" (122). In addition to street habituation, imprisonment and gang activity among Aboriginal young people are directly related to traumatic experiences in the child welfare system (146, 213-4).

Though they did not face complete and permanent severance from family and community relations as a result of residential schooling and the foster care system, the Highway brothers were nonetheless estranged from their reserve communities because of these institutions, and both dealt with the trauma of abuse they suffered into adulthood. Ultimately both Tomson and René Highway decided not to return permanently to

the Brochet reserve of Manitoba where they grew up after their time in residential school; both attended high school in Winnipeg. In their decision to live and work in urban areas, the Highways' lives parallel the decisions of many Indigenous peoples of Canada. According to the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, well over half of First Nations people in Canada live off reserve ("Urban Strategy"). Many of these individuals are drawn to cities such as Winnipeg for employment and rather seamlessly become part of a diverse urban landscape. Like other Aboriginal newcomers to cities, the Highway brothers counted education among motivating factors in their choice of geography. Tomson attended college both at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg and at the University of Western Ontario in London and spent many years as a social worker for Native communities in Toronto before immersing himself in music and theater there and directing the Native Earth Performing Arts organization. René became trained in dance at the Toronto Dance Theatre and had a successful dance career that led him across the globe. But as discussed above, many new urban residents experience challenges through relocation, become part of the city's permanent or intermittent homeless population, and/or experience other hardships associated with poverty, substance abuse, and illness ("Urban Strategy"). Of particular concern is the recent rise of AIDS and HIV infections among Winnipeg's Aboriginal population, which has led some health officials to suggest the possibility that infection rates could explode in number much like what has been documented in sub-Saharan Africa (Skerritt). René Highway was no stranger to this health crisis; he died from complications of AIDS at the age of 36.

Presumably, the Highway brothers themselves experienced difficulties once they arrived in Winnipeg, as Highway's novel displays for its two young protagonists. The narrative traces colonization and urban relocation through the lives of Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis, Jeremiah the older brother who becomes a concert pianist and social worker and Gabriel the younger brother who becomes a ballet dancer. Weaving Cree language and expressions as well as stories from Cree cosmology throughout the narrative, Highway begins the novel by providing readers a window into the Okimasis family's home life in Eemanapiteepitat, Manitoba that is, though not free from the influence of Catholic missionaries or isolated from members of settlement communities, thriving. Abraham Okimasis, the boys' caribou hunter father, is triumphant in his aim to become the first Aboriginal person to win the Millington Cup World Championship Dog Derby, a moment for which the Fur Queen, or Weesageechak, the trickster who "bridges humanity and God" (298), is present. The tenor of this family dynamic is changed forever, however,

when Jeremiah is sent away to boarding school on the recommendation of the family's priest. His brother later joins him there, and the two are continually sexually and emotionally abused, traumas that haunt both of them well into their adult lives.

The brothers' separation from their home community becomes permanent as a result of their experience at the Birch Lake Residential School. Because of his proficiency as an organist at the mission school, Jeremiah attends high school in Winnipeg, where he continues his musical training. Gabriel's decision to join Jeremiah there is directly the result of his family's investment in Catholicism in their home community. In an exchange with his father after he has finished grade school, Gabriel realizes his difference from his parents. His father explains, "The Catholic Church saved our people. Without it, we wouldn't be here today. It is the one true way to talk to God, to thank him. You follow any other religion and you go straight to hell" (109). The impact of his father's words is immediate upon Gabriel. In the words of the narrative, "It was at that moment that Gabriel Okimasis understood that there was no place for him in Eemanapiteepitah or the north. Suddenly, he would join Jeremiah in the south. He could not wait!" (109). Upon his departure, Gabriel's view of home is as follows: "Gabriel could see his parents leaning against a post beside the terminal, holding each other, waving sadly. Close behind them, hands on hips, stood Father Bouchard. And behind the priest, drink-filled revelers stumbled down the winding road back to the village" (112).

Life in Winnipeg is not easy for the boys, as loneliness and a constant sense of cultural difference and isolation abound, yet the two never fully acquiesce to the pressures of assimilation. Of his time in Winnipeg, Jeremiah indicates, "In the two years he had spent in this city so lonely that he regularly considered swallowing his current landlady's entire stock of angina pills, he had given up his native tongue to the roar of traffic" (113). Once Gabriel arrives, however, the two reflect their sense of Cree identity despite the pressures of racism and isolation they face, creating their own Cree community in the city. Their first activity together is a trip to the mall, a fitting and stark contrast to the novel's early images of the winter hunt, an experience that the boys filter through Cree language and stories. Their outing is described as follows: "two brown Indian boys—not one, but two—were dancing-skipping-floating down Broadway Avenue, tripping over each other's Cree, getting up and laughing, tripping over each other's Cree, getting up and laughing" (114). The boys retell in an underwear store the Cree story about the Weesageechak's crawling through the Weetigo's bumhole, a telling they continue at the food court, where they recount how the trickster devours the Weetigo's

entrails. In this scene at the mall, the two demonstrate Indigenization of this colonized space, a cathedral of sorts for capitalism. Importantly, though this location clearly encapsulates the subsuming spatial and economic force of colonialism, the boys describe it in Cree terms that seem to disempower it. Likening it to the Weetigo of the story, Highway writes the following description: “Grey and soulless, the mall loomed behind them, the rear end of a beast that, having gorged itself, expels its detritus” (121).

This moment early in their time in Winnipeg does not make the brothers immune to difficulties or shield them from self-doubt or even a kind of self-loathing, however. These feelings apparently have roots in their abuse at residential school as well as their observation of homeless and addicted Indians on North Main Street. Jeremiah in particular feels alienated from urban Indigenous organizations and pow-wows and hesitant to reject the Catholic religion that his mother begs the boys to practice. This perspective is challenged by Gabriel as well as Amanda Clear Sky, an Ojibwe arrival at Jeremiah’s school who is an Aboriginal community enthusiast, activist in Winnipeg’s own “hub,” and challenger to the colonial lessons taught in European history class. While Jeremiah continues his musical training, immersing himself in Chopin’s melodies as an antidote to loneliness, Gabriel begins taking ballet lessons after a life changing viewing of a performance by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. But Gabriel also struggles with his own personal demons, including his sexual abuse, which seems to spur his dangerous sexual activity with varied people in the venues of North Main. As Jeremiah and Gabriel make their way in Winnipeg, their experiences are marked by transnational encounters with characters of other tribes such as Amanda Clear Sky as well as with those of other races and ethnic heritages. Importantly, their national identity is not muted despite their hardships, and new opportunities away from the reserve seem to galvanize rather than hinder them.

In a way that seems to parallel their own personal pressures in Winnipeg, the brothers learn that their home community is becoming increasingly pressured by resource exploitation, a situation that they overhear wealthy patrons discussing at the ballet performance. This realization is an exciting one for them initially, as they imagine unprecedented wealth for their family and friends. In their minds, the narrative explains, “The twenty-first century had dawned—glorious, golden—on their home and Native land” (142). During a visit home, however, this glorious image is dispelled, and the boys realize that their plans for their lives cannot be fulfilled on the reserve. At his mother’s suggestion that Jeremiah return home to work at the store now that he’s finished high school, Jeremiah bristles, wondering, “How, for God’s sake, did one say

'concert pianist' in Cree?" (189). In this narrative, coming home results in far different feelings than the "homing plot" of earlier Indigenous literatures.

This feeling of separation from his home geography does not prevent Jeremiah from a connection to Cree identity; significantly, however, this visceral connection occurs back in Winnipeg. In the performance of his life, Jeremiah wins a piano contest and experiences a victory that is a doubling of Abraham's dog derby win. Through his performance, Jeremiah envisions himself on a sled being led by Gabriel, who is dancing away from the Weetigo, and ultimately catches a glimpse of the Fur Queen holding out the silver chalice as he is announced to be the first Indian winner of the trophy. Even so, dejected because Gabriel has missed the performance, Jeremiah's victory is compromised, and he wonders, "What was he to do with Chopin? Open a conservatory on Eemanapiteepitat hill? Whip its residents into the Cree Philharmonic Orchestra?" (215). Jeremiah thus decides to become a social worker and abandons his music.

Where many celebrated works of Native American literature from the middle twentieth century would depict such desperation as alleviated by a usually permanent return to the reservation for a reconnection with long-standing community traditions, Jeremiah's eventual recovery from his low point resolves somewhat differently. When Gabriel and Jeremiah suddenly return home as their father nears death, Abraham's parting words to Gabriel in the form of a Cree story signal an important suggestion: "The world has become too evil," he says, "With these magic weapons, make a new world" (227). After Abraham's death, Gabriel decides to take Jeremiah to a gathering in Ojibwe country, and there, they learn of a woman-centered Cree religion that had been suppressed in their home community. But in Ojibwe country the brothers also encounter homophobia, misogyny, and substance abuse, emphasizing that there is no idyllic stage for a simplistic casting off of colonial influence. The brothers must accomplish something different.

In a move to Toronto, Gabriel and Jeremiah begin a collaboration, much as the Highway brothers did, in a theatrical project and community organization for children that brings Cree stories and values to a public stage and features participants representing diverse Indigenous backgrounds in the city. In an interview with Hartmut Lutz in 1989, Highway suggests that his creative inspiration lies in the urban sense of community that he depicts here. Citing the influence of playwrights James Reaney and Michel Tremblay, Highway says, "...they write about working-class people, really grassroots people, basic people, street people from many places. And both superimpose...the level of mythology..."

(90). Highway goes on to name this “superimposition, the combination, the marriage with hard-core reality, the miraculous, or a universal mythology” (90) as the technique that he most admires. Creating his own Native hub in Toronto, Jeremiah thus centers the miraculous on the city’s street people, understanding that this act is in a sense traditional. He asserts, “All he knew was that he had to play or his relationship with Gabriel was history, and he’d be back in the alleyways of Winnipeg. And should the collar of his rented black tuxedo choke off his windpipe, so be it; hands on the keyboard, dressed for the casket, he would die a Cree hero’s death” (267). Thus, through his artistry, in a cosmopolitan setting, Jeremiah asserts Cree kinship, through family obligation, which though outside of the reserve, and indeed outside of Manitoba, leads him to a proper relationship with his community.

In his helpful analysis of Highway’s text within the context of residential school testimonials, Sam McKegney asks, “how can a novel that intentionally diverges from the testimonial paradigm, and, as such, cannot aid in the acquisition of retribution and restitution within the existing legal framework, generate political effect beyond the individual healing of its author? And how can that effect be understood and discussed in non-hypothetical terms?” (138). McKegney concludes that part of the answer lies in Highway’s refusal to construct a narrative that emulates an expected social science framework of victimhood and, in a related turn, his decision to make his narrative a novel rather than an autobiography, play, or television mini-series, all options that he entertained and all options that may have been more directly serviceable for reparation (138). Highway’s text emerges in the aftermath of residential schooling as an important intervention into two-pronged public discourse that McKegney calls “legacy discourse” (144). As McKegney asserts, these two aims of dialogue should be 1) developing resources for Aboriginal economic self-sufficiency and 2) restoring Indigenous pedagogic, spiritual, and governmental modes (145). In McKegney’s words, Highway’s text serves this second aim: “By collaborating and combining Gabriel’s talent for the European art form of ballet and Jeremiah’s talent for classical piano in a modern dance performance based on extrapolated Cree teachings, the brothers are able to interact creatively with their own spiritualities and with a body of Cree spiritual knowledge” (165). I add to McKegney’s conclusion that Jeremiah’s healing process and pedagogical service to others also connects to creative and literal spatial reorientation. By the end of the text, it is clear that though the brothers will not reinhabit the reserve, Gabriel’s global performances and Jeremiah’s pedagogical integration of Cree mythology into a perhaps unexpected urban scene presumably have and will lead others to a sense of spiritual resto-

ration as well as solidarity, which in turn may fuel activism that has historically occurred in urban centers. As is evident in continual appearances by the Fur Queen in unlikely sites outside of the reserve, in the Okimasis brothers' creative assertions of Cree culture within the cityscape, and even in Canada's current debates about urban self-government, reimagining possibilities for what is a traditional Indigenous home or space of political power opens up new potential for transnational, communitarian impulses that are not severed by colonial attempts at removal, BIA relocation, residential schools, foster care, etc.

Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* thus documents and envisions an Indigenous cityscape that is rooted in the stories of those whose removal from ancestral lands does not lead to lack of Indigenous culture but instead brings about a uniquely urban but nonetheless articulate sense of Native identity. Highway thereby complicates the "homing in" theme of canonical American Indian texts, suggesting that for his characters, fulfillment comes not from an in-between Cree identity, but rather from locating and transforming Cree identity within an urban, transnational landscape.

Throughout the fiction and memoir in Highway's text, readers gain access to the realities of contemporary Indigenous peoples' experiences of Canadian relocation policies, the residential school system, the foster care system, and concerns for social justice that emerge from these legacies. Highway's text also links the possibilities for asserting an artistic life in the city with Cree cosmology and language, in effect diverting the consumerist purposes of locations such as the shopping mall and claiming them within a Cree worldview, ultimately resisting assimilation. Understanding Highway's novel as transnational, communitist, and subversive, with Cree historical realities at the center, allows scholars and readers opportunities to understand Indigenous cultures amid mobility, urbanization, and change.

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Notes

1. These initiatives were a reversal of previous policies that prevented some Aboriginal peoples, especially those on the Canadian prairies, from traveling to cities. Specifically, as punishment for the Cree and Métis rebellion of 1885 in Manitoba, a pass system was instituted that restricted Aboriginal peoples to their reserves well into the twentieth century, officially ending in 1941 (Dickason 314-5, 495). Thus, as in the United States, Canadian Indian policy related to urban migration shifted significantly in the middle decades of the twentieth century.
2. Lawrence explains that enfranchisement was “the removal of Indian status from an individual, thereby creating a Canadian citizen of Aboriginal heritage who has relinquished his collective ties to his Native community and any claims to Aboriginal rights” (31). She traces this practice to the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 and describes modifications to, expansions of, and alternately voluntary and mandatory applications of the policy until the 1961 amendment to the Indian Act, which removed compulsory enfranchisement. An Aboriginal man could be enfranchised after acquiring an education, serving in the military, or leaving his or her home community for an extended period (31). Beginning with the 1869 Gradual Enfranchisement Act, women who married “non-Indians” also became non-status, a policy that was finally reversed with Bill C-31, a 1985 amendment to the Indian Act (111-2).

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