

Trickster and Weetigo: Tomson Highway's Fur Queen

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This project paper discusses the Cree mythology present in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. I contend that Highway's conflation of the two mythological characters, Weesageechak and Weetigo, in the figure of the Fur Queen allows the dramatization of the interaction and confrontation between the aboriginal culture and colonizing culture. Through careful attention to imagistic references to the Cree Weetigo tradition, I contend that the Fur Queen is a complex metaphorical representation of the complicated reality faced by Highway's characters. Through the Fur Queen, Weesageechak, the trickster, acts as a positive figure overseeing the success of her Aboriginal charges, while the cannibal Weetigo aspects of the Fur Queen represent the negative impacts and dangers faced by her charges within and from the colonizing Euro-Canadian culture.

## Trickster and Weetigo: Tomson Highway's *Fur Queen*

On June 29, 2007 Tomson Highway participated in the CBC series *This I Believe*. In that radio essay, he states, "I believe that savouring the struggles in one's life is one of the hidden secrets to deep happiness." In his novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* Highway blurs hardship and happiness through the figure of the Fur Queen who is described with both Weesageechak and Weetigo imagery. The Fur Queen who identifies herself to Jeremiah as the universal Native Trickster is not only Weesageechak but also the voracious, malevolent, insatiably cannibalistic Weetigo. Cynthia Sugars claims Highway's use of the Weetigo "represents a critical after effect of colonialism for it [the Weetigo] embodies the ways members of a culture can be induced to turn on their own people" (74). While Sugars does not expand on this idea of induced communal conflict and fragmentation, there are compelling reasons to do so. Highway draws upon a long cultural history containing the possibility of Weetigo transformation, a phenomenon widely accepted among the Algonquin and Cree peoples and disseminated in oral tradition. In their 1998 study "*The Orders of the Dreamed*": *George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth* Jenifer S.H. Brown and Robert Brightman state that there is a "socially shared belief in the reality of windigo<sup>1</sup> transformation" (163). Highway uses Weetigo imagery in describing the residential school's abusive priest which places sexual abuse parallel to the Weetigo's cannibalism. This construction of a Weetigo sexuality within the Christian context places Jeremiah and Gabriel in danger of a sexualized and religious form of Weetigo transformation. After his experiences at residential school and before his father's death, Jeremiah is in danger of completely rejecting his ancestral spirituality and assuming both the religious and sexually abusive Weetigo identities first inhabited by Father Lafleur; in contrast Gabriel eventually does become a sexual Weetigo through his religiously and financially motivated sexual activity but maintains his ancestral spirituality. Thus, Highway uses mythological figures specific to his characters' culture to illustrate the complex issues that the Aboriginal culture and its members must confront within the modern colonial framework. The malleability and adaptive characteristics of the living culture within the modern context of the novel make a simplistic anti-colonial reading problematic. Highway does not glorify Aboriginal

culture or denounce western culture; in the Okimasis brothers he dramatizes the interaction and confrontation between the two cultures.

The dominant North American culture has a surface knowledge of Aboriginal culture through the Trickster figure. Highway manipulates this limited cultural knowledge through fusing the Trickster with less well-known but equally important Aboriginal mythology. In his lecture *Comparing Mythologies* Highway defines mythology as “a discourse on narrative, or the art of storytelling, including, most notably, a narrative on all three of humankind, animal kind and god” (21). The Fur Queen narrative has all three characteristics; she is human in the photo in which she kisses Abraham, god-like in her participation in death scenes and animal in her appearances in synecdochic fur imagery. The Fur Queen’s human ego and mythic abilities reflect the mixed valuation with which “the Rock Crees view Wīsahkīcāhk<sup>2</sup>” (Brightman 64). They view Weesageechak “with mingled contempt, respect, and affection” (Brightman 64) due to the fact that “he is always hungry and sexually adventurous, ... that he was capable of changing form and of conversing with animals and other non-humans” (Brown & Brightman 126). They view him with respectful affection because he “modified the boreal forest environment to make it more suitable for human occupation” (Brightman 64). Weesageechak has their affection and contempt because he “juxtaposes great cleverness and spiritual power with unutterable stupidity” (Brightman 65). Brightman and Brown’s collection and analysis of the Rock Cree’s traditional stories are particularly relevant to Highway’s novel, since his characters are born in the Rock Cree’s traditional territory of northwestern Manitoba. Highway re-inscribes traditional mythology within a modern narrative in a way that fulfills mythology’s role within culture as defined in *Comparing Mythologies*: mythology “maps out the collective subconscious, the collective dream world of races of people, the collective spiritual nervous system” (26). Using the mythology of the Rock Cree and the ambiguity they feel toward Weesageechak and intensifying the darker side of that ambiguity through the infusion of Weetigo imagery, Highway produces a Trickster who has an ambiguous influence in the main characters’ lives and whose symbolic presence inhabits both cultures in which the brothers travel.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Fur Queen fulfills the narrative ends Pulitano posits for the Trickster: “Trickster stories have always aimed at liberating people’s minds, forcing them into self-recognition

and knowledge, and keeping them alert to their own power to heal” (147). The identification of the Fur Queen as Trickster is easily made; however, the complications of Weesageechak and Weetigo combined in this one figure make the liberation of minds, and the forced self recognition obviously painful and possibly dangerous.

Anthropological sources concerning Trickster and Weetigo support the identification of the Fur Queen as embodying both mythological figures. The Fur Queen fulfills many of Babcock-Abrahams’s Trickster qualities: she has “especially exaggerated sexual characteristics” (159), the “ability to disguise [herself] and a tendency to be multiform and ambiguous” (159). She is definitely “of uncertain sexual status” when she appears as the torch singing vamp in drag as well as “exhibit[ing] a human/animal dualism” (160). The Fur Queen is also “ambiguously situated between life and death” (160) through her involvement with both birth and death. The many Cree Weetigo stories and the parallel Algonquin Windigo stories reveal patterns of Weetigo imagery used by Highway in his descriptions of the Fur Queen. Weetigos are described as “disfigured and mentally impaired creatures with torn and dirty clothing, long ungroomed hair, and lips and fingers stripped bare of flesh from autocannibalism” (Brightman 92). Brightman’s analysis arises from stories such as the “Barren Lands Wīhtīkōw” narrated by Albert Umferville in which a trapper “opened the door and there was the wīhtīkōw standing out there. All he could see was his teeth. Lips were all chewed away” (170). Lacking lips, the Weetigo exhales a “breath [which] hisses through his jagged teeth in a loud and sinister fashion ... [while] his eyes, which roll in blood, are huge and owl-like” (Largent 22). Other characteristics common in descriptions of the Weetigo, are the “skeleton of ice or [body of]... solid flexible ice” (Largent 22) and the heart of ice which must be melted for the Weetigo to be truly killed (Brown and Brightman 169). The Weetigo’s icy composition makes its accompanying “high winds and blizzards... in its travels” (Ray & Stevens 122) appropriate. “The gigantism ascribed to the wīhtīkōw by Ojibwas and some swamp Cree groups was not known to Rock Cree” of Northern Manitoba (Brightman 92). This may explain why gigantism is not a characteristic of the Weetigo in Highway’s Cree-based novel, but the rest of the physical characteristics appear in the novel. In Cree society the Weetigo represents the environmental susceptibility to winter starvation and

the ensuing possibility of cannibalism necessitating a societal taboo embodied in the Weetigo figure.

The mental and emotional impact a Weetigo presence traditionally has on intended victims is central to Highway's use of Cree spirituality in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Once a victim is obtained, "it is said that [the Weetigo] usually consume [its] victims raw after first exerting a hypnotic or melancholic influence which immobilizes them" (Brightman 93). As Johny Bighetty narrates in "Wīhtīkōw and Weasel," Wīsahkīcāhk "had to do it for wīhtīkōw, it's wīhtīkōw's orders" (Brightman, 40); the wīhtīkōw has hypnotized Wīsahkīcāhk. Melancholy figures in another Bighetty narrated story, "P.B. and Wīhtīkōw": "P.B. starts to feel lonesome. He felt tired. He didn't feel like working or eating. They say that people begin to feel sad like that when there's a wīhtīkōw somewhere going around" (Brightman, 172). *Colombo's Book of Marvels*, a mass-market reference book, outlines alternative ways the Weetigo may incapacitate its victims:

The Wendigo ... may frighten its victim to death, or it may, like a wild beast attack the victim and, amid shrieks and growls, slaughter him. Yet again it may allow its victim to escape with its life, though transformed by the encounter and devoid of individuality (Colombo, 201).

However, "when humans are unavailable [as prey, the] windigo dines on swamp moss, rotting wood, and mushrooms" (Largent 22). The evil Weetigo embodying starvation cannibalism was not only a mythological figure prowling the winter forest but also any person who actually succumbed to survival cannibalism due to starvation. The traditional beliefs held that through cannibalism one would suffer transformation into a Weetigo. A Weetigo transformation could also be predicted by a dream encounter with the Weetigo or "spirit entities, that 'delegate' the windigo condition" (Brown & Brightman 170) such as the North, Ice, and/or the North Wind.<sup>4</sup> "Symptoms of Windigo possession include brittleness and coldness" (Strandness 39) as well as "ice form[ing] inside the human body, [and] hair grow[ing] profusely from the face, arms, and legs" (Ray & Stevens 122). "If the selected individual does not reject the windigo [spirit helper], then he comes to resemble his guardian in all respects" (Teicher 6).

Weetigo transformation takes both sexual and religious forms in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Jeremiah's susceptibility to Weetigo conversion first presents itself when

Mariesis mentions that she dreams one of her sons might join the priesthood: “what surprised [Jeremiah] was that the notion, far from repelling him, shot a thrill up his spine” (191). The thrill that shot up his spine illustrates Jeremiah’s eroticized attraction to religious vocation. The Weetigo priest’s sexual abuse has infected Jeremiah and he must resist the forces that would have him complete the Weetigo cycle of victim becoming the victimizer. The psychological impact of childhood sexual abuse forms Jeremiah’s unconventional sexual desire. In the only sexual relationship that Jeremiah has in the novel, he only becomes aroused when he can watch the fictional abuse of his mate on the teledrama. When Amanda Clear Sky “wriggled her tongue in his ear . . . Jeremiah shuddered; a worm was inside him. Or a . . . No” (259). Her tongue in his ear nearly pushes him to realize the abuse he suffered at residential school because it is so similar to the “wet tongues burrowing past his lips” he finally remembers in the “vortex screaming with monsters”( 272). However, the repression of his abuse is too strong and he cannot admit that her tongue in his ear makes him think of a penis inside him. While in the throes of what should have been passionate love making, Jeremiah “couldn’t get erect. His sex was dead. The very thought made him sick, as with a cancer. Somehow, misogynistic violence – watching it, thinking it – was relief” (260). The abuse Jeremiah has suffered cuts him off from his body. Violence is more enjoyable than sex and the two are inextricably linked for Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s inability to form a caring relationship due to past abuses places him in danger of Weetigo-like isolation and obsession.

While the sexual attraction to misogynistic violence is one sign of Jeremiah’s possible Weetigo transformation, a more disturbing example of Jeremiah’s dysfunctional sexuality and stronger sign for possible transformation occurs at the Friendship centre. When the sexually abused child, Willie Joe, “jumped . . . on Jeremiah, the rope like arms wrapped around his waist, the hot face buried in his groin” (271), Jeremiah got “a raging hard-on” (271). In the moments before he can report it to the director of the Friendship centre his repressed memories threaten to overpower him: “clawed hands reaching for his testicles, wet tongues burrowing past his lips, his orifices pried, torn, shredded” (272). Jeremiah’s experiences at the residential school have stunted and warped his sexuality. However, these two moments that reveal Jeremiah as fractured and susceptible to the Weetigo influence, also show his strength in resisting the urges the abuse placed within



him. In resistance, he fights the Eurocentric culture working at the Friendship centre, despite or because of the wounds of the attempted assimilation and abuse, which can never fully heal. The possibility of Weetigo transformation cannot ever be fully exorcised; it must forever be fought against. However, while Jeremiah does find the church attractive and the boy arousing, he refuses to succumb to the temptation of indoctrinated behaviour and defends himself against the transformation into the sexual and religious Weetigo.

Highway forms Jeremiah and Gabriel's susceptibility to the colonial Weetigo transformation through Abraham's insertion of the Fur Queen into the communal birthing myth, and through the use of Weetigo imagery in describing her. Abraham's storytelling initiates Highway's reader into the rituals of Cree storytelling in the same way Jeremiah "usher[s] Gabriel in to the rituals of urban life ... [Jeremiah] render[s] the experience memorable ... [through] stretch[ing] truth into myth" (115). Highway stretches his story and slides the reader into the mythic using Cree mythology while also illustrating the collision of cultures that is gradually bringing the Aboriginal belief structures into Eurocentric models of thought. The story of Abraham's victory expands into the mythic by exaggerating and spiritualizing his story. In the very first chapter, the white flame that draws Abraham Okimasis to the finish line becomes the white fox mantle of the Fur Queen. Abraham embellishes his story when he "relate[s] to his two youngest sons ..., [that] the goddess floated up [into the] sky" (12) and the Fur Queen's tiara mutated into the seven stars of Ursa Major. When telling his sons about his victory, Abraham places them in the role of the starry fetus born from the seven stars. The astrological birth myth appearing to Mariesis in an orgasmic hallucination, which flows from the eyes of the Fur Queen's portrait (18-19), reinforces the novel's mythical foreshadowing of Jeremiah's conception. The victory, its joyful recounting, and mythological elements give the Fur Queen a positive presence at this point in the novel, leading the Trickster-searching reader to identify her with the Trickster and to perceive her in a positive role through out the novel despite her Weetigo characteristics.

Coral Ann Howells claims "the spectacular opening scene...signals the explosive entry of a First Nations hero into white popular culture" (86); however, the idea of the Fur Queen as Trickster-protector of the "First Nations hero" is complicated by the

imagery of the malignant and hated Weetigo used in her description: “her teeth pearls of ice, lips streaks of blood” (10). Her teeth made of ice suggest the Weetigo’s skeleton or body of ice. Furthermore, lips as streaks of blood echo Ray’s and Stevens’s description: “the teeth and gums of the creature were caked with blood” (127). When she comes closer to Abraham, Highway uses Weetigo characteristics to describe her and her effect on Abraham: “her eyes burning into his, her person sending off ripples of warm air redolent of pine needles and fertile muskeg and wild fireweed. He couldn’t look away” (11). Abraham is freed from this Weetigo mesmerization for a moment when she looks away, but soon “all realization, all sense, all time suddenly became entangled in some invisible glue. Abraham pulled his stunned gaze from the silver bowl to the Fur Queen’s brilliant smile, where it became imprisoned once again” (11). After she kisses him she expels “a jet of ice cold vapour that mushroomed into a cloud” (11). The scent of muskeg, pine needles and fireweed combined with the mushroom cloud of her breath, all components of the diet of the Weetigo when there is no human prey available, along with Abraham’s immobilization through her hypnotic effect (Brightman 93), all characterize the Fur Queen as a Weetigo figure. Thus, an image of the cannibal Weetigo commemorates Abraham’s apparently positive victory in the southern race by presenting his trophy. Abraham has become the assimilative Weetigo’s human prey and exposes his children to the assimilating culture through the mythologization of his victory.

It is only with Abraham’s embellishment of the experience, when he “relate[s] the story to his two youngest sons” (12) that he moulds the Fur Queen into a positive figure of astronomical myth and source of new born spirits or souls:

...the goddess floated up to a sky fast fading from pink-and-purple dust to the great blackness of night, then became one with the northern sky, became a shifting, nebulous pulsation, the seven stars of the Great Bear ornamenting her crown. And when she extended one hand down towards the hunter on earth, a silver wand appeared in it, as simple as magic. Now a fairy-tale godmother glimmering in the vastness of the universe, the Fur Queen waved the wand. Her white fur cape spread in a huge shimmering arc, becoming the aurora borealis. As its galaxies of stars and suns and moons and planets hummed their way across the

sky and back, the Fur Queen smiled enigmatically, and from the seven stars on her tiara burst a human foetus, fully formed, opalescent, ghostly. (12)

This memorable ending to Abraham's tale of victory strips away the Weetigo aspects of the Fur Queen and replaces them with a fairy godmother's benevolence. Abraham's construction of the Fur Queen into a mythological figure masks her colonial source, blinding his sons to the dangers of the southern society and culture that she partially represents.

The competition between the two belief systems continues throughout Abraham's life and informs the lives of his sons. Abraham always represents himself to his sons as a true Catholic believer; considering his sons' negative experiences of religions, this leaves the boys little choice but to leave their home community. When the two brothers return home for their father's death, they observe a spiritually complex man, pulled between two competing belief systems. In the moments before his death, they unite to tell their father of the abuse they experienced at the residential school, believing the revelation will hasten his death through a shattering of his religious beliefs. However, the priest's arrival silences them; they cannot escape the Weetigo of the Christian religion. The priest's presence, however, does not stop Abraham from telling the story of the Son of Ayash<sup>5</sup>. As he takes the body of Christ into his mouth for final communion, Abraham states the Weetigo is the "most fearsome [evil] among them the man who ate human flesh" (227). His sons are "shocked that this most Catholic of men should resort to pagan tales" (227) at his death. He has been nearly fully indoctrinated by the European religion while maintaining, for most of his life, a nearly traditional life style. At his death both belief systems are represented and are still competing for supremacy.

Throughout the novel, the Fur Queen is identified as a Weetigo figure by her synecdochic symbols' approving facial expressions in responses to disturbing scenes. A white fox pelt winks above Abraham's head when the Jeremiah and Gabriel are arguing about Gabriel having hidden the ballet lesson from him. The Fur Queen smiles again "atop the Yamaha upright" (208) less than twelve pages later, when Gabriel and Jeremiah have a physical altercation concerning Gabriel's homosexuality. The wink and the smile both occur at moments of discord that prefigure the complete break between the brothers, which occurs when Gabriel leaves Winnipeg during Jeremiah's piano competition. Both

altercations concern the Euro-Canadian arts pulling the brothers away from their family: Gabriel's ballet slippers and Jeremiah's piano. Each mention of the Fur Queen's facial expressions prefigures a breach in the brothers' relationship.

Insufficient attention to Weetigo imagery can lead a reader to follow Abraham's mythologizing, and to see the Fur Queen as a purely positive Trickster figure. It is in this vein that Mark Shackleton finds the Fur Queen's wink at Jeremiah to symbolize cultural survival, even while she leads Gabriel into the afterlife:

Gabriel's death is symptomatic on the individual level of the effect of the Christian church on the lives of Aboriginals worldwide. But note here that the Fur Queen, or rather her synecdochic symbol, the white fox fur, winks at Jeremiah, as if passing on a message of optimism in the face of catastrophe. (161)

A lack of attention to the Fur Queen's Weetigo aspects explains Shackleton's optimistic interpretation. Gabriel completely repudiates Christianity and equates the Trickster with the Fur Queen: "the trickster represent[s] God as a woman, a goddess in fur. Like in th[e] picture [of the Fur Queen] (298). Gabriel's spirituality repudiates the residential school's assimilative process. From these cues, Shackleton interprets the Fur Queen's wink as optimistic. However, the appearance of the Fur Queen at Gabriel's death does not fully support that interpretation, because Gabriel only knows Abraham's positive mythologized version of the Fur Queen as Trickster. He does not recognize or know of the Weetigo Fur Queen as portrayed in the opening chapter of the novel. At his death, Gabriel becomes his father during the dog sled race. He experiences the victory at the end of his life, and the Fur Queen leads him to the other side. Thus, Gabriel experiences his death as a victory. The Fur Queen's sash reads 1987, the year of his death. The Fur Queen symbolizes achievement in the dominant white culture; she does not symbolize cultural fulfillment for Gabriel but his achievement as a dancer, choreographer, actor and director. He achieves personal success within the structures of the Euro-centric society represented by the "young woman so fair her skin looked chiseled from arctic frost, her teeth pearls of ice, lips streaks of blood" (305). "The creature of unearthly beauty" (306) is not a Native spirit of positive achievement. She is a Weetigo, representing the western civilization that devours others by imposing its values. Thus, the interpretation-prone wink of the figure representing both the malevolent Weetigo and ambivalent Trickster

represents the difficulties Jeremiah shall face as an Aboriginal artist within the Euro-Canadian society.

Earlier in the novel, the Fur Queen's facial expression is superficially positive, but its appearance in the context of Weetigo imagery makes darker the implications. During Gabriel's first night at the school, the photo of the Fur Queen winks at Father Lafleur when he turns to Gabriel after watching Jeremiah return to bed. Coral Ann Howels has claimed the "sinister Father Lafleur is defeated by the power of the Fur Queen's photograph" (88) through the wink, which fulfills Mariesis's suggestion that the photo will protect Gabriel from evil men. A wink, however, is not necessarily a sign of disapproval, but can also denote complicity and understanding. When the priest's description is considered, it becomes clear that the Fur Queen understands his proclivity for and intention toward sexual abuse. The priest is described in Weetigo imagery: "A dark, hulking figure hovered over [Gabriel],...the Weetigo feasting on human flesh.... the beast reared its head, it came face to face, not four feet away, with that of Jeremiah Okimasis. The whites of the beast's eyes grew large, blinked once" (79). As Sam McKegney claims: "Highway overtly likens the sexual assault on Gabriel to an attack by the cannibal spirit Weetigo, identifying the perpetrator, in Cree spiritual terms, as the most heinous of all monsters" (Narrative Control 70). Highway subtly implicates the Fur Queen in the priest's abuse when he describes Father Lafleur "caught in a web of moonlight, fleetingly just as [he] rose from one bed and moved towards another" (72). This silvery moonlight is an extension of the starlight produced by the seven stars of the Fur Queen's crown. The priest operates within the web of silver light belonging to the Fur Queen; he is caught in her web of plans for the Okimasis brothers as signified by her wink.

The Fur Queen's complicity in the residential school abuse develops into the religious wedge that ultimately separates the Okimasis brothers from their devout parents. As Cynthia Sugars states: "the weetigo ... represent[s] a critical after-affect of colonialism, for it embodies the ways members of a culture can be induced to turn on their own people" (74). Abraham tries to convince Gabriel to quit school at the age of sixteen when he is no longer required to be separated from his family; however, he makes the mistake of praising the church, thus, unwittingly pushing Gabriel away:

“The catholic church saved out 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, that’s for goddamn sure.”

It was at that moment that Gabriel Okimasis understood that there was no place for him in Eemanapiteepitat or the north. Suddenly he would join Jeremiah in the south. He could not wait! (109).

The latest abuse and his father’s Catholic faith together drive Gabriel from his home community; this supports Sugars’s position that the Weetigo represents the fracturing of cultural bonds. The Fur Queen’s mythic power is instrumental in making the religious teachings of the residential school unpalatable to the boys while also driving them from their homeland. Thus, by protecting her charges’ religious autonomy, the Fur Queen brings about the separation from the communal source of their Aboriginal spirituality. Her involvement in negative consequences fits both her identification with the wily Trickster and the destructive Weetigo.

The conflation of Weesageechak and Weetigo places the Fur Queen in an ambiguous overseer role through her opposition to Catholicism during Jeremiah’s first religious instruction at the school. The Fur Queen is referred to during the lesson on Heaven and Hell through an allusion to her kissing Abraham: “‘EVIL’ was right there at his fingertips. He thought it rather pretty, especially the way the V came to such an elegant point at the bottom, like a tiny fleeting kiss” (62). Here the kiss functions as an allusion to the Fur Queen’s kiss: the kiss gives her endorsement to Jeremiah’s admiration of his perfect copy of the word “evil” when he does not even know the word’s meaning. In this scene her approval extends to his inverted valuation of the pictured Heaven and Hell. Jeremiah observes that he could not spot a single Indian person in Heaven, and that all the Indians seemed to live in the attractive tunnels in hell where “there appeared to be no end to the imagination with which these brown people took their pleasure; and this, Father Lafleur explained earnestly to his captive audience, was permanent punishment” (61). Viewing this picture of permanent punishment, Jeremiah is fascinated by the “shameless, strutting personage [King Lucy] to whom... modesty was unknown” (61). His misunderstanding of the values assigned to God and “King Lucy” illustrates Cynthia Sugars’ point that the Fur Queen approves and participates in the hybridization of

Catholic practices such as the childish imitation of Church ceremonies. Sugars states that the use of the Fur Queen's championship cup as chalice and bannock for host, and "the way the boys unknowingly transpose the wording of the Latin mass into nonsense Cree/English provides one means for Highway to parody the forced adoption of Catholicism (and English) by the Okimasis boys" (77). The ambiguous Fur Queen both facilitates and hampers the cultural assimilation into the Euro-Canadian values by subverting the assimilation to Catholicism while forcing them from their homeland into the Weetigo civilization of their assimilators.

After the boys leave the residential school, the Fur Queen continues to be an ambiguous figure, simultaneously representing the oppressed Native culture, and encouraging artistic accomplishment in the Euro-Canadian cultural context. The Fur Queen is present in the portrait of Jeremiah's piano instructor with her white fox stoles. Her presence in the portrait signals the future success Jeremiah will achieve because the Fur Queen represents Abraham's victory. A less affirmative image of the Fur Queen appears the same day when Jeremiah is returning from Mrs. Van Beethoven's and sees the woman in the "white, yellowed with age, polyester fur" coat (105). The Fur Queen gives Jeremiah the choice between two distinct images: first "the Plexiglass-covered display stand bearing the image of an exotic olive-complexioned man in a black tuxedo, a grand piano at his fingertips," and second, reflected in "the curve of the propped-up piano top drifted, teetering dangerously on white high heels, ... the Indian woman in soiled white polyester" (106). Jeremiah understandably chooses the image of a successful piano player over the soiled Aboriginal Fur Queen. The Native woman representing the Fur Queen is wearing a dirty fur in need of care but Jeremiah turns his back on the scene, refusing to protect Evelyn Rose McCrae from the non-Native culture. McCrae embodies the weakened Cree Spirituality while the white teenagers who take possession of Miss McCrae represent the dominant society. Thus, Evelyn Rose McCrae's rape and murder represent the victimization of Native Spirituality at the hands of Euro-Canadian culture. The Fur Queen's Trickster attributes facilitate Jeremiah's future success, while the Fur Queen's Weetigo attributes represent the cultural dangers such success entails.

Upon Gabriel's arrival in the city, the Fur Queen facilitates his success in the foreign culture but also exposes him to the dangers of cultural amnesia. The Fur Queen

both erodes the brothers' Native otherness and facilitates their successes by taking them from their homeland and placing them in the Euro-Canadian culture. The Fur Queen's synecdochic symbol prevents the brothers from veering into unacceptable behaviour: "But for the mannequin in white fox fur who whispered 'ootee-si' - 'this way' - the brothers would have been suspected of transvestite tendencies" (117). Thus, the Fur Queen directs the brothers from inappropriate public sexuality. As Sam McKegney notes, she facilitates their absorption by the Euro-Canadian culture: "the brothers become trickster figures while the mall becomes the Weetigo, complicating the earlier connection between the Weetigo and Christianity to suggest the implication of capitalist economics in the cultural rape of indigenous people in Canada" (Trickster Poetics 92). Through their participation in consumerism, the brothers "implicate themselves in its processes. They go there to become more Euro Canadian .... the two Cree brothers [are] covered by white cultural costumes, with only the darkness of their faces remaining unmasked" (Trickster Poetics 92). McKegney's analysis of the brother's mall experience and the traditional Weetigo and Weasel tale<sup>6</sup> is very useful. As he states the Fur Queen's assistance in navigating the mall does make her complicit in the brothers' conversion to greater Euro-Canadianism. The mall embodies the dangers of assimilation constantly tempting the brothers, while the brothers' insatiable appetites in the food court show the beginning of their conversion in to consumerism's insatiable Weetigo.

The Fur Queen again acts to suppress Aboriginal culture by intervening when Jeremiah sees the ghosts of the two slain women "keeping vigil by their teenaged [and pregnant] sister with the sad synthetic rose. The impulse to race across the street overwhelmed Jeremiah, the need to scream: 'Go! Go back inside the bar! Go home, go anywhere, but don't stay here!'" (138). However, the woman, in a *fur lined* cape who gives Gabriel tickets to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet also thwarts Jeremiah's urge to protect the girl from the young white men whom he associates with Evelyn Rose McCrae's death. With this action the Fur Queen prevents Jeremiah from claiming his heritage, while she also initiates Gabriel's future as a ballet dancer, keeping him in Winnipeg when he is about to leave. Thus, she influences Gabriel's life course just as she influenced Jeremiah's through the influence of the Fur Queen-like Lola van Beethoven.



While the Fur Queen is active in luring the brothers away from their culture, the brothers also summon her at moments of success in the mainstream Euro-Canadian culture's artistic pursuits. Directly after his achievement in the high school production of "The Gondoliers" Gabriel feels worthy of the Fur Queen; he is the "champion of the world" (157); his elation is equivalent to the elation expressed by Abraham in the first chapters of the novel. Jeremiah also experiences mainstream success through a Fur Queen vision, but only after rejecting his own culture. The suppression of his culture leads Jeremiah to success as a concert pianist but the culmination of all his work brings him to a discovery of what he values most. In the competition, he plays for the departed Gabriel and for their homeland:

Jeremiah played a northern Manitoba shorn of its Gabriel Okimasis, he played the loon cry, the wolves at nightfall, the aurora borealis in Mistik lake; he played the wind through the pines, the purple of sunsets, the zigzag flight of a thousand white arctic terns, the fields of mauve-hued fireweed rising and falling like an exposed heart. (213)

He rediscovers the importance of his heritage during his greatest achievement as a pianist. Yet his victory does not make him happy despite its similarities to his father's victory years earlier. He too is the "first Indian to win this grueling contest" (214), but he has won an award that is even more emblematic of foreign enculturation than Abraham's victory in the sled-dog race. His father's victory symbolizes the very identity Jeremiah has repressed; thus, Jeremiah cannot revel in his achievement as his father had. Jeremiah achieves his goal and it leads him right back to everything he has repressed. The Fur Queen symbolizes achievement equivalent to Abraham's dog-sled victory, but also the cultural legacy that Jeremiah has forsaken in pursuit of this goal. The Christianized Abraham values the Fur Queen's recognition of his achievement at an Aboriginal skill, dog sledding, but it came only within the foreign context of a sled race at a time of year during which the northern Cree lived in small family groups and did not socialize widely. Jeremiah values her as symbolic of his achievement at the piano, a foreign instrument; and Gabriel values her as symbolic of his achievement in dancing and acting, both in forms foreign to their Aboriginal culture. She represents validation from outside their culture; she embodies the devaluation of traditional achievements in favour of those

within the boundaries of the Euro-Canadian culture. However, Abraham is living a traditional lifestyle and is never completely enculturated; even at his death he expresses both spiritualities. Thus, their father's achievement symbolizes supremacy for his sons as much as the Caucasian Fur Queen symbolizes the dominating culture. The achievements she crowns may be European, but the brothers retain much of their cultural identity through their identification of the Fur Queen as the embodiment of their father's accomplishments.

While the Fur Queen symbolizes and enables the sacrifice of the brothers' Native culture for their artistic achievement, their successes are achieved only through tapping into the culture and mythology they identify with their father. Embracing his Native identity in his performance leads Jeremiah to the only place he has ever seen any other Native people in the city: the bar which had repulsed him for so long. While in a bar he acknowledges his folly: "across the room, drunken Indians as far as the eye could see. He had tried. Tried to change the meaning of his past, the roots of his hair, the colour of his skin, but he was one of them" (215). Drunk and realizing that he cannot escape his heritage, he attempts to remove the foreign skills he had attained by mutilating his hands with a broken beer glass only to be stopped by the ghost of Evelyn Rose McCrae, "a white fur cape [falling] from her shoulders" (215). The Fur Queen's reappearance saves Jeremiah from ruining his hands for the piano through the twenty-seven months pregnant Madonna of the North who exclaims, "'You make me so proud to be a fuckin' Indian you know that?'" (216). The Fur Queen will not let him destroy the talent that has led to his loss of culture. The Madonna of the North attempts to connect his achievement to his heritage. She shows that Jeremiah's achievement is a result of both the repression foisted upon him by the residential school system and the value he truly places on his heritage. Images of the north fuel his success; he channels his feelings for the north into his playing. Thus, while the Fur Queen aids in his partial assimilation, she is also a symbol of the source of his creativity: the north. Jeremiah has not fully become the Weetigo of the Caucasian school system; he is still resisting its influence through his allegiance to family, culture, landscape, and myth.

Gabriel is more successful in casting off Christian indoctrination; however, its influence still begets his sexual repression. At the gay bar to which he goes in celebration

of his achievement in the high school production, Gabriel is confronted by an alternative vision of “Indianness”: “[the] only other Indian in the room, and he was neither male nor female. Or perhaps both” (168). Gabriel’s first reaction accords with his Catholic education: “he willed the creature away; he-she should leave, disappear, disintegrate” (168). However, once the two-spirited person begins to dance with the “threadbare white feather boa” (168), he/she becomes “a priestess, clandestinely reviving a sacrament from some dangerous religion” (168). Because Gabriel cannot suppress his sexuality, he is able to shed much of the acculturation he has experienced through the residential school. Gabriel realizes the fallibility of the Catholic teachings when he asks, “Would God, in all his wisdom and power, not have good reason for peopling his Earth with such bold freakishness?” (168). This final break from the Catholic teachings of his family frees him from the Church’s sexual repression.

While having repudiated the religious aspects of his indoctrination, Gabriel’s Weetigo sexual insatiability remains as a product of that indoctrination. Free from the Church’s sexual repression he still experiences his sexuality as a religious experience: “his orifices punctured and repunctured, as with nails” (169), the nails that punctured Christ’s hands and held him to the cross. The abuse that he suffered at the hands of the priests has somehow led to a fetish in which he pursues sexual power over holders of religious or economic power. When at church, “the Cree youth curled his full upper lip – and watched with glee as celibacy-by-law drove mortal flesh to the brink” (181). This leads to the priest giving Gabriel his phone number and Gabriel scheduling a sexual encounter. Gabriel’s beauty has mesmerized his sexual prey; he takes advantage of the priest’s weakness and has his satisfaction. The spiritual starvation produced by the abuse at the hands of spiritual advisors leaves Gabriel insatiable in his pursuit of sexual encounters with religious overtones.

The residential school abuse links Gabriel’s sexuality to religion and prostitution. As a child Gabriel experiences sexual gratification in a strapping from the head priest at the residential school. He imagines the priest as,

“God the Father, sitting large and naked in his black leather armchair, smoking a long fat cigar, little Gabriel’s buttocks splayed across his knees, the old man

lashing them with his thunderbolt, lashing them and lashing them until both man and boy gleamed. (85)

To this vision Gabriel's internal response is, "Yes, Father, please! Make me bleed! Please, please make be bleed!" (85). The abusive priest who bribes his victims with chocolate bars shapes Gabriel's mercenary attitude toward sex, an attitude revealed when Gabriel is leaving the AIDs clinic. He trips over a leather-clad man's poodle: "Behind the clinic, the leather man and Gabriel sequestered themselves. There, employing all the trickery he had acquired in Paris, Copenhagen, Sydney, Tokyo, Gabriel laboured at the great knot of tissue" (282). In this sexual encounter he makes fifty dollars which is "not the lighting budget for 'Ulysses Thunderchild,' but enough for a costume" (282). The many city names in this passage imply that Gabriel has been not only promiscuous in his international travels but also been prostituting himself as well. It is clear that Gabriel's sexuality is not the source of his AIDs infection but rather the extremely risky lifestyle he leads due to the priest's sexual abuse. While sexual insatiability can be a characteristic of Weesageechak, the fact that his promiscuity and prostitution lead to his death suggests that he is losing himself to a sexualized Weetigo insatiability linked to residential school religious indoctrination and sexual abuse.

There remain negative aspects within the Fur Queen's appearances and influences despite Jeremiah's and Gabriel's experience of the Fur Queen as a symbol of Native spirituality. Jeremiah becomes sensible to the positive role of Native Spirituality when in a dream the Fur Queen transforms into a torch-singing white fox, a female "far too spectacular: missile-like tits, ice blonde meringue hair" (231). In this description she is a drag queen, more female than female. She walks "as though she [has] North, South, Central America shoved up the crack of her furry little ass" (234). She is very effeminate but her perceived gender is brought into question when she says she "used to be Fred but it bored the hell outta" (231) her. The Fur Queen's ambiguous sexuality informs Jeremiah's attitude toward Gabriel's homosexuality. Highway appears to have changed the Trickster from an observer of negative occurrences in the boys' lives into a driving force behind Jeremiah's decisions. She tells Jeremiah he has to get out there into the world and create entertainment. He cannot waste her time crying about what a hard life he has had. When he protests that she can't tell him what to do, she reveals that she is the

Fur Queen/Trickster: “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” (233-34). However, this dream in a snow bank fulfills two requirements for an individual becoming a Weetigo. Jeremiah’s dream signifies the possibility of becoming a Weetigo through the Fur Queen’s association with the north and freezing to death. According to tradition, the acquisition of a Weetigo spirit helper through a dream prefigures the Windigo transformation, unless the individual rejects the spirit (Teicher 6) which Jeremiah does not do. Even before the dream, which revitalizes his will to live, Jeremiah, in the process of freezing to death begins to turn Weetigo: “His lips had no feeling. The walls of his heart had crumbled” (230). He has acquired the Weetigo lipless state and heart of ice. Then he has the dream about the arctic fox torch singer described with ice imagery: “leaning against a grand piano made of ice, stood a torch-singing fox with fur so white it hurt the eyes ... ice-blond meringue hair” (231). So, while Jeremiah experiences the Fur Queen’s visitation as a positive experience with his father’s Trickster figure, there are Weetigo dangers in this dream of which he is unaware.

After Jeremiah’s near-death dream revelation, Jeremiah asks for Gabriel’s help and to fulfill that request he assumes the Fur Queen/Trickster’s role as guiding figure for Jeremiah. Gabriel is her protégé: he believes the portrait has protected him through his life and now she will protect Jeremiah through Gabriel, who performs an active role guiding Jeremiah into a culturally compatible application of his artistic talents. Through Jeremiah’s dream/hallucination of the Fur Queen, Gabriel becomes the embodiment of the Fur Queen for Jeremiah. Gabriel has the Trickster’s “especially exaggerated sexual characteristics” (Babcock-Abrahams, 159) in his insatiable need for male partners and his extreme attractiveness. His subversive sexuality places him in the Trickster position, as does his position of hovering between life and death (Babcock-Abrahams, 160) through playing the role of their deceased father in a show based on the family stories he has told Gregory Newman. At one point “from his father’s corpse, slowly, Gabriel Okimasis raised his naked torso” (236). Performing as the spirit of his dead father, and living with AIDS situates Gabriel ambiguously between life and death. The aspects that make Gabriel a Trickster influence for Jeremiah are the same characteristics that transform him into Weetigo. The disease that places him as the Trickster ambiguously between life and

death also makes him a Weetigo bringing death to those closest to him. His acceptance of the Fur Queen as his spirit helper, as shown by the exalted position she holds in both his bedroom and dressing room, represents his acceptance of the Weetigo sexual and cultural insatiability indoctrinated by the residential school's systematic sexual abuse and cultural genocide. The Weetigo Fur Queen also comes to him in a dream at death to confirm her role as Spirit Helper, signifying that he has lived as a sexual Weetigo.

Gabriel plays the role of Trickster/Fur Queen to re-introduce Jeremiah to his artistic abilities; however, Gabriel's assumption of the Fur Queen role in mentoring Jeremiah carries with it Weetigo dangers. Gabriel begins by reactivating the brothers' close relationship during the pow-wow. However, despite all his efforts Gabriel cannot get Jeremiah to dance. "Against all reason, Jeremiah was still frightened of this dance, this song, this drum, 'the heartbeat of our Mother, the Earth,' as he had heard it said on more than one occasion. Like the door to a room off-limits to children, it still made his blood run cold" (243). Jeremiah still has not completely rejected the indoctrination of the residential school. He is resisting the spirit helper who is both Trickster and Weetigo. Jeremiah has not yet forgiven Gabriel for his Weetigo characteristics; he still distrusts Gabriel's guidance. The conflation of the two spiritual characters within the Fur Queen and her protégé leaves Jeremiah confused and unable to accept fully the Fur Queen/Gabriel as his spirit helper, thus, allowing him to reject the Weetigo aspects of their guidance and continue to pursue his own healing.

The Fur Queen as Trickster embodies the positive outcomes of education and ambition that are opened for the Okimasis brothers by the colonial powers that be, while her many Weetigo characteristics place her in a position representing the negative consequences. Cultural ignorance of the Weetigo tradition may lead some readers to underestimate the novel's complexity. The identification of the Fur Queen as Trickster and guiding spirit presents an optimistic ending with the characters achieving success within the Euro-Canadian value system, while the Weetigo identification emphasizes the damaging transformation experienced by the colonized individuals. Together the mythological references deliver a more complex and sensitive message concerning the lasting effects of colonization.

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<sup>1</sup> Windigo and Wih̓tikōw are both used by critics as variations on Highway's Weetigo.

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<sup>2</sup> *Wīsaḥkīcāhk* is Brightman's variation of Highway's Weesageechak.

<sup>3</sup> This approach is consistent with Womack's "conviction that Native literature, and the criticism that surrounds it, needs to see more attention to tribally specific concerns" (1).

<sup>4</sup> See "Dramatis Personae" pages 112 and 115 of "George Nelson's Letter Journal" in Brown and Brightman's *The Order of the Dreamed*

<sup>5</sup> For a complete discussion of the Son of Ayash story see McKegney's article "From Trickster Poetics to Transgressive Politics: Substantiating Survivance in Tomson Highway's Kiss of the Fur Queen."

<sup>6</sup> For a traditional version of the tale see "Wīhtīkōw and Weasel" in Brightman's *Ācaoōhkiwina and Ācimōwina: Traditional Narrative of the Rock Cree Indians*.

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