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## **“This Was the Right of Holy Men”<sup>1</sup>**

### **Catholicism, Sexual Abuse and the Shaping of the Native Gay Identity in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen***

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#### **Zusammenfassung**

*Tomson Highway’s Roman Kiss of the Fur Queen thematisiert die sexuelle Verhaltensformung zweier Brüder aus dem nordamerikanischen Cree-Stamm, nachdem diese in einem katholischen Internat von einem Priester missbraucht wurden. Die verbleibende Traumatisierung sowie das durch Kolonialgedankengut geprägte Umfeld scheinen besonders die Art und Weise, in welcher Gabriel Okimasis seine Homosexualität lebt, in beträchtlichem Ausmaß zu beeinflussen. Erstens erfährt er als Homosexueller indianischer Abstammung doppelte soziale Ausgrenzung. Zweitens fühlt er sich wegen seiner sexuellen Ausrichtung zusehends seiner katholischen Familie und besonders seinem Bruder Jeremiah entfremdet. Dieser distanziert sich von Gabriel, weil er Homosexualität mit sexueller Ausbeutung männlicher Kinder gleichsetzt. Drittens führt das Nichtvorhandensein homosexueller Vorbilder dazu, dass Gabriel mehrheitlich kaukasische Männer zu seinem Ideal erhebt und durchwegs ältere Sexualpartner begehrt. In der vorliegenden Publikation wird davon ausgegangen, dass diese Kombination von Faktoren der Nährboden für Gabriels Masochismus ist. Dieser treibt ihn in selbsterstörerische sexuelle Handlungen, welche in seinem AIDS-Tod enden. Vermutlich ist Tomson Highway’s Roman mehr als bloß ein Versuch, homosexuelle, von Internats-Nachwirkungen bestimmte Erfahrungen in ein indianisch geprägtes Umfeld zu projizieren. Er liefert eben-*

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1 This quotation comes from p. 78 of the novel. At the beginning of the sexual abuse scene, Gabriel thinks that what Father Lafleur is doing to him usually happens in residential schools and constitutes a prerogative of the priests. This exemplifies the priests’ belief that they have a right over the bodies of the Native children. This clause also underlines the role of Catholicism as an agent of destruction and contains an oblique sarcasm about the pedophilic priest’s ‘holiness,’ which makes it particularly fitting for the title of this article.

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*falls eine überzeugende Botschaft von Kraft und Heilung durch Humor, sexuelle Selbstbestimmung und Rückbesinnung auf kulturelle Wurzeln.*

### **Résumé**

*Le roman Kiss of the Fur Queen de Tomson Highway (paru en français sous le titre Champion et Ooneemeetoo) aborde la question délicate du développement de l'identité sexuelle de deux frères Cris abusés sexuellement par un prêtre dans une école résidentielle catholique durant leur enfance. Le traumatisme résiduel et le contexte colonial semblent affecter particulièrement le vécu de Gabriel par rapport à son homosexualité. D'abord, il vit une double marginalisation du fait qu'il est à la fois autochtone canadien et gay. Du fait de son orientation sexuelle, il éprouve un sentiment d'aliénation par rapport à sa famille catholique et surtout par rapport à son frère Jeremiah, qui le rejette car il associe homosexualité masculine et abus de jeunes garçons. Enfin, l'absence de modèles identitaires homosexuels le conduit de toute évidence à élever des figures paternelles, principalement caucasiennes, au rang d'idéaux et à se chercher systématiquement des partenaires sexuels plus âgés que lui. Cet article développe la théorie que cette combinaison de facteurs conditionne le masochisme de Gabriel et l'incite aux comportements sexuels autodestructeurs qui l'entraînent vers le SIDA et la mort. Cependant, ce roman ne tente pas uniquement de retranscrire l'expérience gay ou gaie autochtone post-écoles résidentielles: il délivre également un message d'espoir en démontrant la possibilité de guérir et de retrouver son autonomie par un humour subversif, la liberté sexuelle et une reconnexion avec les cultures aborigènes.*

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### **Introduction**

Tomson Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* [KoFQ] (1998) problematizes the shaping of two Cree brothers' sexual identity by sexual abuse in a Roman Catholic residential school. Coupled with the colonial context of Canada in the years 1950 to 1980, residual trauma seems to affect particularly Gabriel's experience of his homosexuality. The combination of racism and homophobia estranges him not only from the mainstream, but also from his community and from Jeremiah. Moreover, pedophilic violence and the invisibility of Native gay men probably condition his masochism and his self-destructive sexual behaviour. As for Jeremiah himself, his apparent asexuality and his homophobia seem to work as a façade to repress his own attraction to little boys. Highway further sustains his argument through a dense network of symbolism related to both Cree and Catholic belief systems. Metaphors of predation and cannibalism linked to the figures of the Weetigo and of Christ haunt the whole plot and deliberately blur the notion of victimization. In a series of ironic twists, Christian imagery is further appropriated into gay symbolism and

Gabriel's stigmatized sexual freedom and Cree beliefs help him recover his agency. This essay addresses a significant gap in the existing criticism on Native literatures in English: few scholars have investigated fictional works dealing with the impact of the residential schools on First Nations LGBTs (see Ryan 2006, 41).<sup>2</sup> With a few notable exceptions, this theme in *KoFQ* has hardly been the subject of literary criticism. The near-total absence of written records on the experience of homosexual, transgendered, and Two-Spirited Natives in the residential schools seems to point to an implicit taboo among present-day First Nations communities, and this taboo perpetuates dangerous myths about how same-sex sexual abuse can 'make' people homosexual (Ryan 2006, 41). For these reasons, it is essential that this topic in *KoFQ* should be analyzed thoroughly, especially since this novel contains autobiographical overtones and thus sheds light on the real-life experience of Natives with non-conformistic genders and sexualities who survived the residential schools.

### **Oneemeetoo / Gabriel, the "Cree Dionysus" (284)**

Gabriel's life during and after his time at the Birch Lake residential school is characterized both by multiple marginalization and by his struggle for resistance and agency. As a sexual abuse survivor, a Native Canadian, and a gay man, he has to face several types of pressures that influence the specific way in which he experiences his homosexuality. Roughly speaking, these obstacles can be summarized into two main manifestations of white imperialism. The first one, racism, is epitomized in the novel by the residential schools as assimilationist institutions. Significantly, the Roman Catholic Church appears as the main agent of cultural genocide, as it snatches Native children from their families, tries to impose its dogmas on them, and systematically prevents them from practicing their languages and cultures. One might also argue that the molestation of male children by Father Roland Lafleur is racist in impulse, as he obviously thinks that no one is going to believe 'Indian' boys (see Ryan 2006, 41) and probably objectifies and exoticizes them into brainless dark-skinned 'Others.' Thus, physical and sexual violence at Birch Lake are also means of asserting white and patriarchal privilege. In this regard, the rapes of little boys constitute colonial acts that serve as synecdoches for the "[p]enetration" of the Americas by Christopher Columbus and subsequent generations of settlers (122). The fact that Highway calls indoctrination in residential schools "mind fucking" (qtd. in Ryan 2006, 41) even suggests that he views rape as the central colonial activity or at least, as one of the most meaningful metaphors for colonialism.

Homophobia and heterosexism constitute the second significant obstacle in Gabriel's life.<sup>3</sup> As a Cree man who also happens to be gay, Gabriel carries a double

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2 This initialism refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and communities; it is used to acknowledge the diversity of 'queer' people. Many variants of this term exist, such as "LGBTI," which also includes intersex people.

3 In this essay, the word "homophobia" is used in the sense of an irrational aversion or hatred of homosexuality and homosexuals (see Ryan 2006, 14). The term "heterosexism" refers to "the sys-

stigma (see Ryan 2006, 19). As several theorists argue, various forms of Western discrimination such as racism, sexism, and homophobia do not exist independently or in a mutually exclusive way. These oppressive ideologies interlock in dynamic ways (see Cannon 1998; Dickinson 1999, 178, 183; Ryan 2006) and thereby make “those who cannot be neatly categorized into any one group” (Ryan 2006, 36) face increased discrimination and problems (17, 19, 23, 25, 36, 72). For some scholars, racism, sexism, and homophobia reinforce each other and even constitute three different manifestations of the same problem, white imperialism (Cannon 1998; Dickinson 1999). As far as Aboriginal North Americans are concerned, homophobia and heterosexism are certainly as much part of the colonial system as racism, since they were imported by the European invaders and more particularly, by Christian missionaries and priests (Cannon 1998, 280; Dickinson 1999, 178; Ryan 2006, 36-37, 41). Cannon even contends that both the attempt to erase traditional Native sex/gender systems (including same-sex relationships) and the imposition of heterosexual marriage, patrilinear descent and Western gender roles were instrumental in the colonization of Canada's First Nations (280, 286-291; also see Dickinson 1999, 178; Ryan 2006, 37-38, 42-43). All in all, the intersection of racism and homophobia in Gabriel's life prevents him from developing a firm sense of belonging. He cannot really find a place in the mainstream gay and lesbian movement, as the description of his first entrance at the Rose indicates that the bar is ethnically segregated (166-167). His acceptance in the mostly white gay and transgendered milieu further seems to rest solely on his androgynous beauty and on his ‘exoticism.’ Similarly, heterosexism in Eemanapiteepitat constitutes one of the causes of Gabriel's sense of estrangement with regard to his parents, relatives, and fellow villagers.

Indeed, Gabriel is doubly marginalized at another level, as he is rejected not only by the mainstream but also, more indirectly, by his own family. Because of Catholic indoctrination, compulsory heterosexuality prevails in the Cree village – a bitterly ironical fact, since the community members implicitly learn from Father Bouchard to view homosexuality as taboo or abnormal (125) while Gabriel and Jeremiah are molested by a priest. As a good Catholicized Native, Abraham tries to pressure Jeremiah into becoming a priest (190-191) and Gabriel into marrying and having children (226). As demonstrated by his death scene, no alternative to ecclesiastical asexuality and to ‘straightness’ exists for him:

“I never thought I'd see you again,” Abraham whispered [...]. [...]  
 “I've been ... busy,” Gabriel finally replied.  
 “Busy? With ... what?”  
 “Dancing.”  
 “Dancing? Hmph. Are you ... married? [...] Do you ... have ... children?”

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tem of knowledges or ‘political institution’ through which heterosexuality is either implicitly or explicitly assumed to be the only acceptable or viable life option” (Cannon 1998, 291).

The words jammed up in Gabriel's throat. He was going to retch (225-226).

The Cree patriarch obviously thinks of the institution of Christian heterosexual marriage as having absolute value and of love and sex as finding their normal outcome in procreation. Gabriel's powerlessness and disgust probably point out the fact that he internalizes homophobia and shame to some extent as a result of having his identity constantly denied by his relatives and by the wider colonial society. A scene from his adolescence even shows him "terror[ized]" (189) at the idea that Abraham might read in his eyes that he has slept with numerous men (189-190). Probably afraid of disappointing his father and of being ostracized, Gabriel chooses to live a double life and accepts from Abraham a large amount of underlying – and unwilling – psychological violence.

However, the most tragic part of Gabriel's experience as a gay Native is certainly the fact that he even has to hide from Jeremiah, the most significant person in his life. As a budding 'white man's Indian,' young Jeremiah emulates the hateful language of the Caucasian male teenagers from Anderson High, such as "Wanna blow job? Go check out them faggots at the Rose" (165-166). When Jeremiah finds out that Gabriel takes ballet lessons, the younger one even feels compelled to answer his insinuations with homophobic comments:

"So what's with these *ballet slippers*?" Jeremiah asked [...]. "You haven't been taking ballet, have you?"

[...]

"What else is there for me to do? After school?" [...] How he [Gabriel] would love to throw his tea at his brother's face, scorch that supercilious smirk off.

"Yes, but ballet?" What was this guy, anyway, one of them limp-wristed pansies?

"You take piano. I take dance. What's your problem?"

"So why do you have to make such a big secret out of it?"

"I didn't want the boys at school to call me ..." Gabriel flailed. "You know, a poof, a sissy, a girlie-boy. So I lied. [...]" (195-196).

This scene emphasizes Gabriel's painful dilemma: since Jeremiah is probably the only person to whom he can really relate, he passes as straight, denies his own identity and even insults himself. At the same time, Gabriel clearly resents his brother for parroting prejudiced views of gayness and for 'making' him feel ashamed of his sexual orientation.

The tension between the two brothers reaches its climax when Jeremiah realizes that Gabriel and Gregory are lovers. Because of Jeremiah's ignoble accusations, the conflict soon escalates into a petty fight:

"How can you let someone do what that disgusting old priest did to you? How can you seek out ... people like that?"

"And you?" Gabriel grabbed the wrist and flung it to the side with such force that Jeremiah reeled. "You'd rather diddle with a piano than diddle with yourself. You're dead. At least my body is alive."

When the roaring in his ears subsided, Jeremiah was lying on the floor, Gabriel standing over him, his face smeared bloody.

Clutching at his belly, Jeremiah whimpered, "What would Dad say?" [...] "Sick. That's what he'd call ..."

Gabriel landed with the whole of his weight. He would gouge out his brother's eyes. Where was a knife, a screwdriver, a pencil? ... "And you," between pummels, he spat, "how can you still listen to their propaganda? After what they did to us?" (207-208).

In this passage, the frustrations, anger, and shame that Gabriel has been silencing for so long finally explode in Jeremiah's face. Confronted with Jeremiah's rejection, humiliating remarks, and reference to Father Lafleur, Gabriel feels a murderous hatred for him. The dialogue further suggests that the roots of their ideological conflict lie deeper than in a debate about homosexuality: their diverging worldviews stem from their opposite perspectives on Christianity. As a staunch Catholic who has internalized colonial lies, Jeremiah sees homosexuality as unnatural and perverted. Moreover, he believes that Gabriel's sexual identity turns him into an accomplice of their abuse, into a voluntary sex object for "cradle snatcher[s]" (207). Gabriel, on the other hand, thinks that Jeremiah is the one complicit in what happened to them since he does not put into question the colonial dogmas of the religion that devoured them. As a result, the younger Okimasis brother feels betrayed: indeed, Jeremiah chooses to remain faithful to Christian Fundamentalism rather than to his only younger brother. Clearly, the quarrel involves an unbearable amount of bitterness for the two of them and makes their relationship unworkable. Gabriel finally attempts to break Jeremiah's arm so that he can never play the piano again (208), he moves out of their apartment (209), and a "cold war" ages between the two brothers for thirteen years (239).

However, one could reasonably wonder about the legitimacy of a claim that seems implicit in Jeremiah's indignation, namely the notion that Gabriel's molestation by a male priest made him gay. The idea that Highway intended this interpretation has led some critics to denounce *KoFQ* as a homophobic novel (Moss 2006). However, the narrator uses 'marked' or ambiguous terms to describe Gabriel since the moment when he is five years old. For instance, when he arrives at Birch Lake, the boy's eyes look "doll-like" (69), his skin "translucent" (69), and the nuns exclaim that he is "[m]uch too pretty" to be Jeremiah's brother (69). As for Gabriel's association of the physical pleasure of the abuse scene with a dream of dancing with Car-

melita Moose (77), it does not necessarily indicate that he felt attracted to her before. According to Goldie, the boy might “[link] this moment of homosexual arousal with a public heterosexuality” (210). Moreover, this sensation may simply remind him of a moment that he enjoyed earlier on the same day when he danced with Carmelita (75-76); in other words, the dream might only evoke his passion for dancing. Nevertheless, it is probably true, as Goldie argues, that “[f]or a gay man this abuse cannot easily be divided from the [...] recognition of his sexual identity” (213). Goldie points out that after all, Gabriel does derive some pleasure from the sexual and physical ill-treatment while Jeremiah apparently does not (213).

Indeed, one can safely infer that pedophilic abuse does condition certain specific aspects of Gabriel’s sexuality, particularly his masochism, his attraction to white men older than him, and his risk-taking, even self-destructive sexual behaviour – the latter becoming evident when he prostitutes himself (266, 282, 295) and certainly has unprotected sex. One could argue that for Gabriel, the most influential factor in the context of this traumatic event is the invisibility of homosexuals in the mainstream due to heterosexism (Ryan 2006). The absence of gay role models and especially of Native gay ones seems to explain the fact that Father Lafleur haunts virtually all of Gabriel’s sexual life (Goldie 2003, 210-213; see Ryan 2006, 14, 24). Goldie points out the painful fact that some homosexual men who were sexually abused by older men as children later interpreted this experience as an empowering initiation (210):

Arguably, in a society ruled by compulsory heterosexuality it can be a necessary awakening: without the intervention of the older homosexual, the young gay man can be left in a quandary of impossible recognition. The awakening is often represented as a question of identification: the sexual encounter shows the young homosexual that there is another homosexual. Far more important, however, the encounter shows that a sexual desire which seems invalid or even unthinkable has the potential to find reciprocity with another human being (210).

This may explain why Gabriel is consistently attracted to white teachers (124-125, 198-205) and priests (180-181, 184-185, 226), thus to older men who fulfill a social role similar to that of Father Lafleur: one could argue that Gabriel unconsciously views Lafleur as a role model and fetishizes father figures as a result. This pattern adds another level of ambiguity to Gabriel’s sexual identity, as repetition compulsion stands in complete opposition to empowerment from a purely Freudian perspective. In other words, it seems that as a result of his homosexual abuse in a homophobic society, self-(re)victimization and the enjoyment of his sexual freedom cannot be dissociated from each other in his life. Gabriel’s deep-seated masochism seems to partly originate from the fact that he associates pleasure with pain because physical ache was intimately linked to his first experience of sexual arousal. In

the belting episode (85), which, as Goldie underlines, “reads like a scene from an S&M novel” (211), Gabriel may also feel a distorted, almost epiphanic joy at being the centre of attention of this God-like figure. It is further a well-documented fact that victims of abuse often tend to develop a low self-esteem and to indulge in self-destructive behaviour as a result. In fact, the experience of homosexuality alone can prove isolating enough to drive many people to risk-taking attitudes (Ryan 2006, 29), not to mention the additional, specific problems of Native gay men (Ryan 2006, 29, 39-40, 46-47). The combination of sexual molestation, homophobia and colonialism in Gabriel’s life leads to dramatic consequences, as he eventually dies an untimely death from AIDS (298-306). All in all, his entire life seems irremediably plagued by the consequences of his years of abuse. The same applies to Jeremiah’s own tormented private life – although, as the section on symbolism demonstrates, the picture is far more complex and positive than it might seem at first sight.

### **Champion / Jeremiah**

Although Jeremiah seems heterosexual, an analysis of his own reaction to his trauma, of his sexuality, and of his relationship with Gabriel is highly relevant to a discussion of homosexuality in *KoFQ*. First, the deeper reasons for his homophobia deserve closer inspection. His disgust obviously originates not only in his staunch Catholicism and in the heterosexist indoctrination of his home village. As a result of his own conscious and unconscious memories of the residential school, he associates the figure of the gay man with a predator that terrorizes children. In other words, his fear of male homosexuality may be close to a real, clinical phobia, as gayness evokes in his mind nightmarish images of being torn apart (272, 287) and of watching powerlessly as his “baby brother” (204, 238, 250) is being eaten alive (79-80). The news of Gabriel’s affair with Gregory seems to awaken Jeremiah’s agonizing guilt at being unable to protect the boy from the priest. When he sees Gregory and Gabriel kissing, he becomes completely shell-shocked:

Jeremiah stopped breathing but walked on anyway. For there, against the bedroom wall, black on white, Gregory Newman hung nailed to his brother, by the mouth.

Through the elevator walls, like the breathing of a corpse, Jeremiah heard the voice: “Is big, eh? Is big.”

He clamped his eyes shut, swallowed hard, and willed his body dead. It existed no longer; from this day on, he was intellect – pure, undiluted, precise (204-205).

This episode constitutes a clear reenactment of the trauma, a vision of absolute horror for Jeremiah. The image of his body and mind growing numb echoes his paralysis during Gabriel’s ‘initiation’ by Father Lafleur, when he does not manage to utter any sound and “some chamber deep inside his mind slam[s] permanently shut”



(80). He experiences the sight of the two men “nailed” together in a grotesque parody of the crucifix as so overwhelming that he denies it almost immediately, which parallels his telling himself in the abuse scene that “[i]t ha[s] happened to nobody. He ha[s] not seen what he [i]s seeing” (80). In other words, Jeremiah displays symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Jeremiah cannot conceive of homosexuality as positive or pleasurable and wants to save Gabriel from himself. This association of gay sex with the predation of his brother by ogre-like monsters becomes particularly clear in a grotesque vision that Jeremiah experiences as he is competing for the Crookshank Memorial Trophy while Gabriel is moving to Toronto with Greg:

These weren't dogs pulling at his [Jeremiah's] sled, these were young, naked men, winged like eagles, straining at the harness, panting out whorls of vapour. And at the lead, [...] his little brother ... sailing past the moon for the planet Jupiter. The cities of the world twinkled at his feet – Toronto, New York, London, Paris: the maw of the Weetigo, Jeremiah dreamt, insatiable man-eater, flesh-devourer, following his brother in his dance (214).

Nevertheless, Jeremiah's feelings concerning Gabriel's homosexuality appear complex and contradictory. Jeremiah may neglect his brother for his piano (126, 195, 202) and discriminate against him, but he deeply cares for him and feels a strong sense of duty towards him. In his mind, Jeremiah begs his little brother not to leave him (213), and his masterful concert becomes a wailing song about their separation (211, 213-214). Later, Jeremiah finds his winning of the trophy worthless, as he is plagued by loneliness, internalized racism, and the memory of the brutal murders of Evelyn Rose McCrae and Madeline Jeanette Lavoix (215-216). He feels that Gabriel has betrayed him, yet the fact that he wants to mutilate his own hand with a glass shard may indicate that he feels guilty: the punishment that he is planning to inflict on himself is similar to Gabriel's threat to break his arm. The next scene in which the readers see the Okimasis brothers together takes place at Abraham's deathbed and shows Jeremiah taking Gabriel's hand in support when the patriarch asks Gabriel if he has children (226). The two young men seem to intend to explain to their father what happened to them at the boarding school and in what abomination Abraham became unwillingly complicit (226). Yet, this event does not bring about the brothers' reconciliation and they keep living separately.

It is only when thirty-three-year-old alcoholic Jeremiah calls his brother for help that they start reconnecting with each other. On the other hand, Jeremiah has not come to terms with Gabriel's homosexuality yet: when Jeremiah sees a worried Gabriel looking for him on Manitoulin Island, he thinks sarcastically that his “*virginal* baby brother ha[s] hunted him down” (250). He further runs away when Gabriel gets bullied by four gay-bashers because he realizes that he is “embarrassed to be caught in cahoots with a pervert, a man who fuck[s] other men” (250). However, Jeremiah's

decades-long sense of guilt comes back to him when he realizes his "cowardice" and "fraternal irresponsibility" (262), and he accepts the "[p]enance" (263) that Gabriel gives him, overcoming his irrational fear of playing the piano again. This enables Gabriel to take revenge (264-265), but also to force him to start enjoying life again. The brothers then begin to heal together from trauma and alienation by performing their arts and by expressing their experience through the traditional Cree story of the Son of Ayash.

At the end of the novel, Jeremiah has very clearly recovered from his homophobia and given up on his Catholic beliefs in order to reconnect to his First Nations roots. At his younger brother's deathbed, he prevents Mariesis from bringing a priest and the nurse from disturbing Ann Adele and Amanda's Anishnaabe ceremony (304-305). In a way that evokes storytelling in many First Nations traditions, the novel ends on no firm sense of closure and leaves the readers free to draw their own lessons from the plot (see Maracle 1990, 11). One can only suppose that Jeremiah is going to find the inner strength to go on with his life just as Highway survived his brother René's death from AIDS (see Goldie 2003, 213; Moss 2006). On the other hand, his reminiscence of being raped during a dream indicates that he has not totally recovered from his trauma and might never do so (286-287). Still, the readers can find comfort in the idea that Gabriel meets an epiphanic death (306) surrounded by human warmth and that Jeremiah has understood the errors of his former ways.

However, another unresolved aspect of Jeremiah's trauma appears more disquieting, namely his own 'perversion' in the psychoanalytical sense. On the surface, Jeremiah seems to be a straight man who represses all of his sexual drives because of several shocks associated with sexuality. As Fee argues, "[for him] the repeated brutal sexual killings of Cree women in Winnipeg [...] link heterosexual sex with violent brutality" (2003, no page). His abuse at the residential school as well as his confrontation with the rape and murder of the two Mistik Lake women further seem to render him impotent (see Fee 2003, no page). However, it soon turns out that he is actually morbidly attracted to sexual violence. As a teenager, he experiences a disturbing vision of his own genitalia ramming screwdrivers and broken beer bottles into the vagina of the Madonna of North Main and thereby endangering her fetus (144). The scene that most clearly reveals his sadomasochism and repressed love for violence against people 'weaker' than him is his lovemaking with Amanda. When she bites his ear, he "wail[s]: yes, Father, make me bleed, please, please, make me bleed" (259), which parallels Gabriel's cry of masochistic pleasure in the belting scene (85). Moreover, Jeremiah further realizes with horror that he cannot have an erection without watching Amanda's soap opera tape of the domestic fight during which an Aboriginal husband hits his wife:

He 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).

This passage reveals that Jeremiah holds the potential of becoming a molester of Native women, as he cannot dissociate sexual gratification from pain and brutality. This makes him more sadomasochistic than Gabriel, who, after all, enjoys pleasure for pleasure's sake, uses sex as a coping mechanism and finds several sweet, loving boyfriends.

The revelation of Jeremiah's perversity finally reaches a climax in the scene in which he narrates the legend of the Son of Ayash to daycare Native children. When little Willie Joe asks him about the cannibal monster Weetigo, Jeremiah first marvels at his mouth, "a little red cherry, ripe for the plucking" (271), a metaphor that Father Lafleur uses earlier on to describe the Okimasis brothers' lips (73) and that refers obliquely to Everett Millais' controversial painting, "Cherry Ripe" (1879). The pedophilia and predatory connotations accumulate when Jeremiah reflects that children smell so fresh (271) and that "[y]ou c[an] take them in your hands, put them in your mouth, swallow them whole" (271). Ironically, Jeremiah identifies with his molester and becomes himself an embodiment of the Weetigo precisely as he explains the myth to the child. The boundaries between abuser and abused blur even more when the boy, visibly attracted to Jeremiah, buries his face in the man's groin (271):

"A Weetigo ate me," the child mumbled into the faded blue denim. And then bit. Up Jeremiah's spine shot a needle longer than an arm. In a panic, he disengaged himself and squatted, his eyes inches from the six-year-old's. He had a raging hard-on.

"What do you mean, Willie Joe?"

Willie Joe said nothing, but, like a clandestine lover, kissed Jeremiah, square across the lips, then went skipping out: "*Ayash oogooosisa, oogooosisa ...*" (271).

The fact that Jeremiah thinks that Willie Joe looks like a six-year-old Gabriel adds to the ambiguity of this episode, which becomes potentially incestuous. Jeremiah's reaction further provides another explanation both for his 'sexlessness' and for his rejection of Gabriel. What Jeremiah may actually fear is his own latent homosexuality and particularly his impulse to molest little boys. Ryan argues that a person who views homosexuality as a learned rather than a genetic behaviour (as Jeremiah probably does) will tend to find a gay or lesbian similar to him or her more threatening than one who is not (2006, 15). This might be what disturbs Jeremiah the most about Gabriel's gayness: Gabriel is his brother and grew up in the same conditions as him, and thus unconsciously confronts him with his own attraction to male children.

As a result, one might reasonably question Jeremiah's heterosexuality: for all the readers know, he might as well be bisexual or a repressed homosexual. Goldie claims that Highway explained to him his choice of making his novelistic equivalent Jeremiah straight unlike him: "he [Highway] replied that he wanted to show what he saw as the particular devastation that the sexual abuse in the residential schools visited on heterosexual Natives" (213). As demonstrated earlier, this argument seems disputable. However, if Highway did intend this character to be 'completely straight,' *KoFQ* might indeed be a potentially homophobic novel, as it would then imply that the experience of abuse made Jeremiah develop predatory homosexual tendencies. In other words, this interpretation of *KoFQ* might pathologize male homosexuality by describing it as the result of same-sex pedophilic violence. On the other hand, this very discussion of Jeremiah's sexual orientation probably rests on shaky ground: like much current queer criticism, Highway might be trying to demonstrate the fluidity of sexual identities as well as the artificial and damaging nature of Western categorizations of human sexuality.

#### **'Sacred' vs. 'Pagan' Imagery: Catholicism, Cree Orature, and Metaphors of Predation**

In *KoFQ*, Highway develops a highly polysemic network of associations tied to Catholic and Cree imagery. The main identifiable cluster of symbols centers around the figure of the Weetigo and other metaphors of predation and cannibalism, especially as linked with the Catholic Church and with the pedophilic priest. This use of a myth from Cree oratory is located at two levels: first, Highway resorts to the Weetigo as a way of structuring his narrative and of codifying his own pain. Second, the Okimasis brothers instinctively reshape this 'pagan' image in order to make sense of their sexual assault. The Gothic aspect of this representation mirrors the boys' feelings of confusion and powerlessness when confronted with an incomprehensible and tremendously upsetting event. Thus, the passage in which Jeremiah witnesses the abuse scene in the dark reads like the description of a horror movie:

A dark, hulking figure hovered over him [Gabriel], like a crow. Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honeycomb, or the Weetigo feasting on human flesh. As he stood half-asleep, he [Jeremiah] thought he could hear the smack-ing of lips, mastication (79).

In the boys' and the readers' minds, Father Lafleur thus becomes an evil incarnate, a supernatural monster whose negative energy seems exclusively directed against innocent children. As Lane argues, this association is meant to "[deal] with an image that is without an original. That does not mean that the sexual abuse did not take place, just that there exists no originary or universal aesthetic site that can construct it, represent it, as a norm against which it can be measured [sic]" (1990, 194). According

to Lane, this explains why the reviewer of *Ulysses Thunderchild* is confused by the representation of “the cannibal spirit shedding his costume at death, revealing a priest’s cassock” (Highway 1999, 285): what the Cree brothers are precisely trying to perform is “[an] image [that] comes from nowhere. And goes nowhere” (285; see Lane 1990, 191, 194). Ironically, the review turns out to be more insightful than it is meant to.

The equation of Catholicism with the devouring alive of disempowered human beings is further extended to rituals such as the eating of the Host during communion. When a nun misses a morsel of the host at Birch Lake, Gabriel catches with the paten “the fragment of falling flesh [of Christ’s body]” (82) in a scene whose grotesque comic mood barely hides its connotations of preying and of brutal dismemberment. Similarly, when teenage Gabriel goes to church with Jeremiah, he thinks of the host as “a length of raw meat” (181) and leaves the place of worship with “his mouth spewing blood, his bloated gut regurgitant, his esophagus engorged with entrails” (181). With the priest as a “wizard” and Gabriel’s inner voices demanding that someone “[k]ill [the savage],” the picture is complete to evoke a Satanic mass (181). Gabriel later makes his thoughts explicit in a theological debate with his brother. While Jeremiah clings to his Catholic faith and views Native religions as savage and pagan (184), Gabriel argues emphatically that Catholic churchgoers are the real barbarians: “Christianity asks people to eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood – shit, Jeremiah, eating human flesh, that’s cannibalism. What could be more savage – ?” (184). Although one could argue that he should not take religious metaphors at face value, the important aspect here is that he expresses a psychological reality very present in his mind and in the novel. Moreover, this scene usefully subverts the Western depiction of First Nations peoples as cannibal savages; indeed, it even inverts the stereotype. The association of the Church itself with the Weetigo also bespeaks its oppressive nature with regard to colonized populations; throughout the novel, Catholicism is described as an entity that attempts to eat the bodies and minds of the Natives, that destroys them from within and without.

However, the Weetigo is not solely associated with the Church; on the contrary, it becomes a highly ambivalent figure. As Goldie points out, the metaphor of predation also evokes (homosexual) pleasure; “[the Weetigo’s] swallowing obliterates but also enraptures” (213). Thus, in the abuse scene, Gabriel enjoys tremendously the old man’s fondling (77-79). Moreover, the image of the bear hunched over a honeycomb also evokes the fact that this premature experience of sex reminds Gabriel of the taste of his “most favourite [sic] food, warm honey” (78-79). From this moment on, Gabriel thinks of honey every time he makes love, which underlines once again how much difficulty he meets in dissociating his sexuality from the pedophilic incident. After Gabriel comes out, metaphors of incorporation, predation and cannibalism also start to depict French kisses, oral sex, and penetration between men. When Gabriel meets Wayne, his mouth is “taken by this city-tasting mouth, its tongue moist, alive” (132). Similarly, when the boy enters the Rose for the first time,

a grotesque orgy ensues in which “the body of the caribou hunter’s son [is] eaten, tongues writhing serpent-like around his own, breath mingling with his, his orifices punctured and repunctured” (168-169). This complicates even further the notion of Gabriel as a victim of abuse, as the source of trauma and pain overlaps with the source of pleasure. In a way, Gabriel becomes involuntarily complicit with his abuse just as Willie Joe does by loving being preyed upon by Weetigo-like men. This seems to partly validate Jeremiah’s view of Gabriel’s lovers as ogre-like threats. Thus, Highway is wary of idealizing Gabriel into an innocent victim and male homosexuality into freedom and empowerment: for Gabriel, having sex as a Native gay man constitutes a subversive political act (see Ryan 2006, 19, 73) against the racism, patriarchy and heterosexism of the colonial system, but also is a way of offering himself as a ‘piece of meat,’ an exotic sexual object to eat and penetrate *ad nauseam* (266).

Moreover, Gabriel and Jeremiah themselves become Weetigo-like characters in several instances. As mentioned earlier, Jeremiah has an atrocious eye-opener when confronted with the pedophilic predator in himself. As for Gabriel, towering over six-year-old ballerinas in the dancing room explicitly makes him feel like a Weetigo (152). In the ‘prostate episode,’ he further gags after imagining himself swallowing the ‘Christ-like’ piglet corpse and its “essence of maleness” (125). These two allusions obviously contain vague pedophilic connotations. An even more disturbing detail is that during the abuse scene, the priest’s silver crucifix or “naked Jesus Christ” (78) enters Gabriel’s mouth and that the throbbing movements make it brush against the child’s lips. Gabriel feels so much pleasure that he “[is] about to open his mouth and swallow whole the living flesh” (78); he further thinks of the man on the cross as “a living, breathing man” (78) who tastes like warm honey (79). This scene therefore involves mutual cannibalism: Christ as a synecdoche for the Catholic Church both eats and is eaten by the Cree boy.

As a result of its ambivalent use in the novel, the figure of the Weetigo becomes a Janus-faced one, both oppressor and oppressed, devouring and devoured. The young victims of the beastly priest internalize the Weetigo and become themselves potential assaulters attracted to the metaphorical and ritualistic eating of human flesh, even to the maiming of innocent bodies. In other words, the cannibal monster also embodies internalized violence, internalized sexual abuse and internalized colonization. The key to this somewhat confusing use of symbolism lies in Jeremiah and Gabriel’s conversation about a farcical etiological narrative from the Cree oral tradition. The Cree Trickster Weesageechak descends to the Earth in the shape of a weasel and, in order to prevent the Weetigo from continuing to eat human beings, crawls up his anus and eats his entrails from the inside (118, 120). When Weesageechak comes out of the monster’s belly, his white fur coat is covered with excrement (118). Feeling sorry for him, the Creator dips him in the river but, since he holds the Trickster by the tail, its tip remains dirty (121). Therefore, the Weetigo appears as an entity that self-destructs through its very cruelty and that dies through the very action on which it thrived, which may also explain why Father

Lafleur looks so bitter and unhappy (286, 297), probably eaten up from the inside by his negative feelings and actions. In the context of *KoFQ*, the image of Weesageechak “crawl[ing] up the Weetigo’s bumhole” (118) also displays a highly ambivalent gay connotation.

Another locus of ambiguity in Highway’s symbolism lies on Gabriel’s relationship with Christ. As mentioned earlier, Gabriel thinks of this figure as a sort of arch-victim of cannibalism and ill-treatment through Holy Communion, the ‘eating’ of the cross during his own abuse, and the inhuman torture of crucifixion itself. It ensues rather naturally from his masochism and from his Catholic childhood that Christ becomes for him an object of sexual arousal. As a teenager, he realizes that Christ’s nakedness arouses him (129). In Mrs. Bugachski’s piano room, the crucified figure with “a crown of thorns particularly profuse with blood” (128) and with its exposed heart already creates some restlessness in Gabriel’s body (128), but the boy feels particularly excited at a carving of Christ getting whipped across the buttocks in Our Lady of Lourdes (177-178). He even envies him (129). In this way, Highway implies that Gabriel’s love for pain has been produced by a specific ideological context and he identifies the oft-documented “masochistic sensuality” of Catholicism (Goldie 2003, 211). The hidden sexual subtext of Christianity is further present in a series of symbols that teem with *double entendres*: the priest views the brothers as “Caravaggio’s cherubs” (73), Gabriel looks like an “angel” (82, 166), Newman thinks of Gabriel’s pelvis “as a plate with an offering” (200), not to mention the sadistic sexual connotations centered on the Host. The cross itself becomes associated with pleasure and pain – or pleasurable pain – after it becomes a phallic symbol during the abuse scene (78). When Gabriel participates in the ‘gay orgy’ at the Rose, the lovemaking is described in an indirect way by means of Christian symbolism. “[T]he silver cross ooze[s] in and out, in and out, the naked body pressing on his [Gabriel’s] lips, positioning itself for entry” (169), “[punctures] his orifices” (169) and gives him the taste of warm honey (169), which suggests that Gabriel strongly associates sex with Father Lafleur’s sweet-tasting silver cross. Interestingly, the image of the phallic crucifix and of the cross-like penises penetrating Gabriel’s mouth evokes the insolent notion of Gabriel performing oral sex on Christ himself. However, the comic aspect of this subversion of Christianity barely hides its connotation of sexual violence, which darkly recalls the rape scene in *Dry Lips* – in which a man of the Wasaychigan Hill reservation rapes a woman of his community with a crucifix (1989, 99-100).

Surprisingly, Gabriel himself is consistently presented as a Christ figure. This becomes clear in the several instances in which he performs scenes from the Gospels as Jesus. The chapter following the sexual abuse scene shows him carrying the Cross up Eemanapiteepitat Hill while, rather typically, getting whipped by Jeremiah as a Roman centurion (83-86). The Cree ‘actors’ then strip him down, tie him to the cross, and forget him there during the drinking session that follows (86). As a teenager, Gabriel further remembers farcically performing the Last Supper with other Cree boys in the dormitory of the Birch Lake School (179). Interestingly, Judas is played

by Jeremiah (179), who later betrays him because of his Christian standards of sexual morality. Gabriel obviously identifies with Christ's victimization and presumed masochism, but he is also, like Jesus and like the archangel Gabriel, the bearer of 'good news.' While Jeremiah becomes totally disconnected from his roots and tends to wallow in depression and alcoholism, Gabriel stays more in touch with his 'true,' organic self, both as a Cree man and as a homosexual. As a result, he manages to rescue Jeremiah from a vortex of self-hate by bringing him to the Anishnaabe pow wow (240-247). While Jeremiah fools himself and tries to be a white man, Gabriel understands some of the dynamics of colonialism and generally acts as the more enlightened of the two. A dynamic character, he keeps moving on and enjoying his life as much as he can – although one might argue that his perpetual displacement and his numerous lovers betray the instability of his life (see 237) and his self-destructive way of coping. Both through sex and through art, he manages to exorcize his trauma to a certain extent and to achieve some agency. Unlike Jeremiah, he does not accept the idea that he might be fated to be inferior.

As a result, Gabriel transgresses and invalidates the Western, Christian dichotomy between purity and impurity. According to orthodox Christian standards, he is guilty of the deadly sin of lust as well as of 'sodomy.' Nevertheless, he is consistently described as an innocent, loving, and upright young man who feels sudden waves of tenderness for his brother (161, 293) and would never betray him. Even though he experiences post-traumatic flashbacks until the very end (296-300), he does not feel bitter and eventually leaves Jeremiah with a positive message:

"Remember that day the caribou almost ran us over?" Gabriel smiled.  
 "And you dragged me up that rock? Saved my life. But I'm not a child any more, Jeremiah. Haven't been for a long time. There is nothing you could have done about this. What I did, I did on my own. Don't mourn me. Be joyful" (301).

On his deathbed, Gabriel thus reminds Jeremiah of the time when he saved him and tells him not to feel guilty. He takes full responsibility for contracting AIDS and wants his brother to enjoy his life after his own death, a token of Gabriel's maturity and even wisdom. Throughout the novel, he thus maintains a radical form of purity and innocence within himself, which, according to Christianity, should stand in contradiction to his fetishism and sexual promiscuity. By this, Highway seems to imply that Christian binaries fail to acknowledge the complexity of life and of human beings. In a short essay, Highway further argues that Christianity criminalizes sex and joy while the Cree language contains an inherent sense of 'silly' humour and is based on the notion of life as beautiful and enjoyable, which includes the joy of physical gratification as well (2005, 160-168). As a result, the fun-loving Gabriel may act as a Trickster figure, an impish androgynous character that transcends moral boundaries, "a clown who bridges humanity and God – a God who laughs, a God



who's here, not for guilt, not for suffering, but for a good time" (298). However, one might argue that his tragic death prevents him from being a completely empowering character. Furthermore, the fact that he may have contaminated several other men with HIV leaves the reader with mixed and uncomfortable feelings.

In a nutshell, Highway's novel explores the tensions between the resilience and survival of the Okimasis brothers on the one hand and the residual trauma visible in their nightmares and self-destructive coping mechanisms on the other hand. Confronted with the same patterns of abuse and with the same colonial context, Gabriel and Jeremiah react in dramatically different ways, one growing up into a buoyant, oversexed gay dancer and the other becoming a Puritanical, homophobic and sexually repressed pianist. One of them lives intensely but eventually dies from AIDS, while the other leads an alienated lifestyle and wastes his talent by drinking his shame away until his brother brings him back to life. It is interesting to note that Gabriel, who suffers from multiple forms of discrimination and from the absence of significant role models, lives in a more connected and 'authentic' way than Jeremiah for most of the story. Tomson Highway further makes use of a rich and polysemic network of Cree and Christian symbols in order to lend meaning to the two brothers' experience of oppression and partial recovery. The oral narratives about the Weetigo and the Son of Ayash in particular provide them with a positive framework to understand trauma, internalized abuse, and a potential victory over their own inner monsters. Highway's mischievous, indeed Trickster-like use of Catholic imagery further strikes one as highly subversive when Jesus becomes a gay S&M icon, phallic crosses epitomize the complicity of Christianity in the colonial rape of Aboriginal land, and the main Christ figure of the novel is a gorgeous homosexual Native who fully enjoys his sexual emancipation. Ultimately, one may also consider that for present-day First Nations young gays, Tomson Highway can constitute a useful role model, as he has become established as a critically acclaimed playwright and novelist.

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