

A Process of Thought and Being: Aboriginal Realism and Cultural Healing in Joseph Boyden's  
*Three Day Road* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

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## Abstract

In this thesis I examine the relationship between the healing of cultural trauma and connections to Aboriginal communities in Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. These novels are both concerned with the development of Aboriginal identities within a postcolonial world and depict this world from a specifically Cree perspective. As such, I situate these novels contextually and theoretically, with references to the specific Cree mythologies and narratives that inform the novels as based upon the theory of Indigenous Literary Nationalism. I argue that their inclusion of specific Cree perspectives within a realistically rendered colonial world creates a new form of literary realism called Aboriginal realism which presents readers with a different way of interpreting reality. Their concern with addressing traumas inflicted on Aboriginal communities by colonial institutions, specifically residential schools, and demonstrating possible methods of individual and cultural rejuvenation situates these works as politicized objects with real-world applications. I argue that through the creation of their characters, both novels posit that a connection to Aboriginal communities and culture is necessary to heal from past traumas and for the creation of a healthy, evolving, and sustainable Aboriginal identity. As such, these novels provide their readers with examples of how they too may overcome the traumas of their pasts, while pointing out ongoing problems within Aboriginal communities, such as adherence to Western-imposed ideological systems, which preclude complete cultural regeneration.

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Chapter One: Aboriginal Realism and Cultural Healing in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*  
and *Three Day Road*

*“The value of resistance is the reclaiming of the sacred and significant self. By using story and poetry I move from the empowerment of my self to the empowerment of every person who reads the book.”*

Lee Maracle “Oratory: Coming to Theory” 240

**i. Introduction**

In the novels *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *Three Day Road*, Tomson Highway and Joseph Boyden, respectively, create representations of Cree characters whose identities and perspectives on the world around them are influenced not only by their interactions with Euro-Canadian culture, but also by their traditional cultural heritages. My study of the two novels, which is based upon my interrogation of western realist writing techniques and how the authors combine Cree spiritual realities with these forms, demonstrates the adaptive nature of the texts and how the authors create the mode of what I will call Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> realism. The creation of Aboriginal identity in the novels is important because the world and the events in it are interpreted by characters with specific perspectives, thus shaping the reality which the authors depict. The identities of the characters have been shaped not only by their Cree cultural backgrounds, but also by their interactions with colonial forces, such as residential schools. As such, they present ways of seeing the world that do not necessarily conform to Western interpretations of reality. Their perspectives differ from western, rationalist ways of seeing the world and the problems of colonialism and offer alternative, Native-based solutions to those problems. In both novels it is a reliance on community and spirituality which leads to the characters’ survival. The National

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms Aboriginal, Native, and Indigenous, and variations thereof, interchangeably throughout my thesis. Firstly, because these are the terms used in the critical literatures consulted and cited in my thesis and secondly, to improve readability as opposed to using one word throughout the following 120 pages.

Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program (NNADAP) illuminates the differences between Western and Aboriginal ways of seeing the world in an article published on culturally specific healing practices:

Within western science, the term ‘evidence based’ involves an approach that emphasizes the pursuit of evidence on which to base its theory and techniques. It is derived from a collection of ideas and observations, some of which have been tested and demonstrated to be valid and reliable across specific populations of people. The ‘indigenous knowledge-informed evidence base’ involves an approach to healing and wellness that emphasizes the integrations of physical *and* spiritual realities, such that the manifestation of spirit in physical reality is accepted as proof when the understanding of such manifestation can be tied to cultural teachings. (Hopkins and Dumont 1-2)

The realist aspects of the novels, discussed in detail in Chapter Four, create a recognizably realistic representation of the world, while the spiritual aspects provide a Cree-specific interpretation of reality. Because an “indigenous worldview is said to be ‘holistic,’ ... it encompasses all aspects of life: the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual” (Hopkins and Dumont 7) in representations of reality. Both novels take great pains to enfold spiritual elements into the fabric of reality and are concerned with aspects of cultural healing and the regeneration of identity and community. As such, the authors’ novels embody the real-world practice of healing drug and alcohol abuse in Native communities, illustrate some of the causes of this abuse, and demonstrate different ways one may go about recovering from addiction. This process mirrors Lee Maracle’s claim that the “stories and the poetry [of Aboriginal writers] bring the

reality home and allow victims to de-victimize their consciousness” (239). In the context of these two novels, both Highway and Boyden use their stories to demonstrate the reality of colonization in Canada from a distinctly Native perspective. Their novels function as theories connected to human experience and interaction which offer their readers ways to “de-victimize” their consciousness through a recognition of the Aboriginal realities of colonial experience and representations of characters who are able to overcome their traumas. Therefore, rather than merely presenting the cultural product of substance abuse, the authors demonstrate the process by which some of these problems are created. Approaching the novels from this perspective shows that they are not solely creative fictions, but politicized objects concerned with educating Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations alike on the underlying factors of substance abuse problems in Native communities and on specifically Cree ways of overcoming such addictions. By extension, we see how the authors conceptualize authentic Aboriginal identities and realities through such creative imaginings and use them as foundations for acknowledging the effects of past trauma and to show how to heal from such traumas.

Both authors depict specific Cree cultures (Highway writes from a Rock Cree perspective, while Boyden draws on the culture of the James Bay Cree) and how they have been damaged by colonial institutions to illuminate some causes of specific social problems such as drug or alcohol abuse<sup>2</sup> or self-abuse, in Gabriel’s case. The authors depict the causes of these problems from a Cree point of view and demonstrate how a connection to one’s cultural roots or

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<sup>2</sup> A 1998 NNADAP review conducted surveys of health care professionals, community leaders, social services and NNADAP members and asked them to rate to what extent alcohol and drugs were a problem in their community on a scale from 1 (not a problem) to 5 (a constant problem). The mean score for alcohol and drug problems ranged from 4.2 to 4.4 (out of 5) with a combined percentage of 83% to 90% saying that alcohol and drugs were either a constant or a frequent problem. This data indicates that despite progress in areas of substance abuse, there are still issues that need to be addressed within these communities. For more information see the NNADAP- General Review 1998- Final Report on Health Canada’s website.



community is necessary for survival and functions as a method of counteracting substance and self-abuse. Health Canada's website cites a Saskatchewan study in which "treatment centre staff ranked 'lost cultural identity' as the single most important factor for drug and alcohol abuse among First Nations people and Inuit" and that in "Aboriginal tradition, the health and well-being of an individual flows largely from the health and social make-up of the community" (Alcohol, Drugs and Solvents n.p.). In light of this study, we see a correlation between the characters' initial loss of identity and fracturing of their communities and the subsequent substance or self-directed physical abuse they participate in. Therefore, the regeneration of Aboriginal identities and communities in the novels speaks to their potential for healing past colonial traumas, often engendered through substance abuse or self-abuse, in the novels and the real world. The overall messages of these novels and the importance they place on culture mirrors the mission statement of the NNADAP, signifying the real-world applications of their content. Rather than simply acting as creative imaginings of identity or culture, these novels embody "the foundational belief that indigenous-specific cultural practices, drawn from an indigenous worldview, would provide the best route back to wellness" (Hopkins & Dumont 1) for Aboriginal peoples. A 2010 study by the NNADAP on the importance of cultural healing practices within their renewed framework of addiction services states that when asked "what knowledge base and process qualifies as evidence?," [researchers] are now invited to include both western evidence *and* indigenous knowledge" (Hopkins & Dumont 1) in their studies. Though the novels are not rigid frameworks outlining the steps necessary for community health and well-being, both offer interpretations of how to enact them on an individual level and demonstrate how their characters overcome, or not, the traumas and abuses they suffered.

Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is set in a contemporary Canadian environment, while Boyden's *Three Day Road* is located in the decades leading up to and including the First World War and both novels include spiritual elements within their otherwise realistic narratives. Boyden includes Niska's visions and Windigo transformations within realistic representations of Canada and Europe. Highway veers away from a strictly realist representation of Canada and includes instances which may seem dreamlike or magical to certain audiences, such as the initial scene with the Fur Queen and her subsequent appearances. Though these events and situations may seem to reside outside of a typical western reality, they are significant because they are all directly influenced or shaped by Cree spiritual beliefs. The inclusion of Cree-specific spirituality in the novels means we can classify them as works of what I call Aboriginal Realism, a narrative style that incorporates spiritual realities into a rigorously realistic narrative world. To understand the spiritual elements of the novels they must be approached from an Aboriginal perspective. This chapter will bring in theories of Indigenous Literary Nationalism to provide a context for why these works, and works by other Native authors, should be interpreted from a culturally sensitive perspective. These theories emphasize the need to interpret and criticize works of Indigenous literature within the context of the cultural traditions that inform them, which speaks to the desire for and necessity of establishing a body of Indigenous nationalist literature and criticism. Based on the contextualizing crux of these theories, an articulation of the specific Cree narratives and spiritual beliefs which inform the novels is necessary. These narratives include the Son of Ayash, the history of the Weetigo (or Windigo) and the figure of Weesakeechak. By bringing all these elements together in a complementary manner, I will create a solid foundation for investigating these novels in a culturally specific and theoretically sound manner.

A reason that a culturally specific study of these two novels is necessary is that there is a tendency in the criticism of *Three Day Road* to critique the novel using specifically Western theoretical perspectives. For example, Susan Kathleen Moore applies Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection and psychoanalytic process and Richard Kearney's definition of working-through, to explorations of trauma in the novel. While these theories offer interesting ground for study, they are necessarily culturally anachronistic and so gloss over important constructions of Aboriginal reality and identity in an eagerness to apply specific theories with which the critic may be more comfortable. In so doing, there is the potential for a perpetuation of critical colonization of Indigenous literatures and a misapplication of theory which does not necessarily take into account the author or the content of the novel itself. Though there is less of a tendency to apply culturally disjointed theory to Highway's novel, Cynthia Sugars' categorization of the Fur Queen as a hybrid figure is indicative of a Euro-centric understanding of Cree spirituality. She essentially uses this figure in a way that supports her overall argument that Highway's novel "disallows any singular statement of Native authenticity through its treatment of hybridized identity," while "refus[ing] to slide into a naive and depoliticized celebration of the hybrid" (73), but she seems to ignore the cultural connotations of *wīśahkīcāhk* and plays into the idea that cultural symbols such as the trickster, can "easily become labels, commodities, and stereotypes, ways of explaining and controlling that which is unfamiliar" (Fagan "What's the Trouble with the Trickster" 5). Her critique of the Fur Queen/Trickster figure embodies an essentializing tendency of critics when faced with the culturally specific sign of the trickster. As Kristina Fagan points out, these studies "move away from an 'embodied' figure with roots in Indigenous lives towards a trickster that is primarily a metaphor for a particular theoretical stance" (7). In this

case, the stance being represented is that of postcolonial studies and hybridization in particular. Rather than representing a “hybrid and highly ambivalent figure” (Sugars 74), the Fur Queen represents *wīsahkīcāhk* (more commonly referred to as Elder Brother) a traditional Cree figure with the capacity for both good and evil, and who can change shape at will. In that regard the Fur Queen is not a hybridization of Indigenous and Western cultural systems, but Highway’s creative imagining of what *wīsahkīcāhk* can look like, and how he or she can behave in the contemporary Canadian environment.

By comparing the two novels, we can see that Highway’s determination to depict a Cree perspective illuminates a similar tendency in Boyden’s work. Though the structures, contents and methods may differ, the authors’ end results, the creation of Cree identities and perspectives, and the realities of the novels which stem from them, are the same. A comparison between the two authors demonstrates that despite their different writing styles both create worlds in their novels which introduce readers to Cree ways of seeing and being in contemporary Western Canadian or European culture. The identities they construct for their characters are an integral component for understanding how these worlds are created as they are predicated on the understanding that it is the individual perspective formed by a cultural perspective that shapes experience and the reality of the novel. By introducing Euro-Canadian readers to alternate ways of seeing the world, the authors can create a catalyst for, if not empathy, at least an understanding of or appreciation for other cultures with which their readers share communities and interact on individual and social levels.

The proceeding chapters are broken down as follows: Chapters Two and Three look at the constructions of Jeremiah’s and Xavier’s identities and Gabriel’s and Elijah’s identities,

respectively. Both chapters focus on the characters' experiences of trauma and how those traumas, in conjunction with their spirituality, shape their lives and interpretations of reality. Jeremiah and Xavier function as case studies who embody the practice necessary for survival and the adaptation of their identities. Gabriel and Elijah highlight ongoing problems in Cree communities which preclude their survival and development of identity. The constructions of these characters illuminate the authors' demonstrations of integral aspects of Aboriginal authenticity and identity and how these specific identities are necessary for healing. These chapters are the foundation for Chapter Four, which takes the individual experiences and perspectives of the characters and applies them to the specific worldview being created. This chapter interrogates the realism of the novels and situates them within an Aboriginal realist framework by highlighting the Cree realities created by the authors and characters. The novels culminate in representations of what is necessary for Aboriginal communities and individuals to heal from past traumas and demonstrate how the authors, through their characters, create representations of the models contained within the novels. Both authors demonstrate a living, evolving Aboriginal culture as a necessary foundation for positive community and individual relationships with each other and the world.

## **ii. Theory**

Now that I have discussed why a comparison of these two novels using specific cultural contexts is necessary, I will give a brief outline of Indigenous Literary Nationalism, which at its most basic level emphasizes the need to interpret and criticize works of Indigenous literature within the context of the cultural traditions that inform or shape them. I rely mostly on Craig Womack's *Red on Red* and Simon Ortiz's "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural

Authenticity in Nationalism” because their arguments connect to the importance of Aboriginal authenticity as elucidated in my thesis and the necessity for cultural specificity when studying Aboriginal literature. Ortiz’s argument that any Aboriginal experience is authentic regardless of how much or how little it is impacted by colonialism is necessary because in both novels the characters struggle to adapt their Cree heritage, knowledge, and traditions to the contemporary cultural moment. In most cases they have experienced cultural perspectives and teachings of the Western world and must incorporate them into their identities. However, this does not make them “hybrid” individuals, rather individuals who creatively adapt to the present moment and who represent different types of authenticity which do not necessarily rely on pure traditionalism. Womack’s argument for cultural specificity supports my claim that a better understanding of the traditions and spiritualities which shape these novels provide different interpretations of them, specifically by situating them as objects whose main objective is to demonstrate how Aboriginal communities and individuals can rebuild and regenerate productive identities in the modern age.

The roots of Indigenous Literary Nationalism can be found in Simon Ortiz’s seminal work “Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism,” which was originally published in 1981 and is included in the 2006 edition of *American Indian Literary Nationalism* by Jace Weaver, et al. This continued inclusion speaks to the endurance and relevance of Ortiz’s concepts of an Indigenous nationalist literature. This article seems to be a direct response to studies of Indigenous literature which focus on how “the indigenous peoples of the Americas have taken the languages of the colonialists and used them for their own purposes” (Ortiz 256) and arguments that claim this appropriation “means that Indian people have succumbed or become educated into a different linguistic system and have forgotten or

been forced to forsake their native selves” (256). As opposed to viewing the use of the new language systems and the creative media of colonialists as a dilution or loss of indigenous selfhood, Ortiz argues that these tools “are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them” (254). One of the most important points that he emphasizes is that “it is entirely possible for a people to retain and maintain their lives through the use of any language” (257). Though initially discussing the adaptation of Christian religious ceremonies by the Acqumeh, Ortiz applies these theories to Indigenous literature and so argues for a recognition of the creative adaptation of the “many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset [indigenous peoples]” in a way that “makes these forms meaningful in their own terms” (254).

In light of Ortiz’s concept of creative adaptability, an authentic Indigenous experience or identity is not contingent on strict adherence to traditional languages, customs, or belief systems. As demonstrated above, tradition can be adapted to certain historical or present day events and experiences in order to “bring about meaning and meaningfulness” (255), specifically by making these events significant in their own terms and not those of colonialist powers. He claims that the most authentic form of growth and expression is retained in the oral tradition, which still continues to this day, and that the members of his community were “naturally authentic as they sought to make a lesson of history significant” (256) in the context of their community. Though the context and methods of expressing authenticity are important, the reason for the struggle of indigenous men and women “to create meaning in their lives in very definite and systematic ways” (256), which is a struggle against colonialism, gives “substance to what is authentic” (256). Ortiz is arguing against an idea of authentic Indigenous identity associated with those who have been untouched by colonial contact, and supports a version of authentic

experience and selfhood which includes creative adaptability to colonial modes of thought, interactions, histories, and means of expression. In this way, he argues, Native peoples are resisting forced colonization. If this theory is applied to the literature of Boyden and Highway, we see that Indigenous spirituality is an integral component of the fictional realities as they are interpreted by the characters. The Cree spiritual lens the authors use informs how the characters interpret and represent the reality of the novel. In this sense both authors are representing authentic Indigenous experiences and identities, despite the medium through which they choose to express themselves. The novel, which is a cultural object developed by West and could be interpreted as an inauthentic mode of expression for Aboriginal authors, is instead adapted to suit the needs and purposes of the authors who use it. Though both authors represent different creative (and in some instances, destructive) responses to enforced colonization, the idea and representation of an authentic Indigenous self and experience is prevalent in both novels.

Because the characters' perspectives, identities, and the realities which stem from them rely on their interactions (to varying degrees) with their specific cultural traditions, one must understand these traditions in order to fully appreciate how and to what end they are being used by the authors. Though looking at Indigenous works from a culturally specific perspective which takes into account Native writers and their communities is not the only way to understand this literature, Craig Womack argues that it is "an important one given that literatures bear some kind of relationship to communities, both writing communities and the community of the primary culture, from which they originate" (4). Like Ortiz, Womack is careful to point out that this theory is not arguing for "pure, authoritative [perspectives], uncontaminated by colonial contact" (5), but that an Indigenous point of view is necessary in establishing a national literature



because these authors and works “rise out of a historical reality wherein Native people have been excluded from discourse concerning their own cultures” (4-5). In constructing a literary nationalist identity through a Native point of view, authors, scholars, poets, and dramatists will be able to reaffirm “the real truth about our place in history - [and demonstrate that] we are not mere victims but active agents in history, innovators of new ways, of Indian ways, of thinking and being and speaking and authoring in this world created by colonial contact” (6). As opposed to arguing for the hybrid nature of Indigenous literatures and identities in a postcontact world, Womack also draws attention to the importance of adaptation, of a reconfiguration of what it means to be Indigenous in the contemporary moment. Instead of calling these narrative modes or perspectives hybrid or hybridized, Kristina Fagan points out a more useful term that can be used to describe novels (and postcolonial identities) of this kind. She uses Lisa Brooks’ term, “adaption,” that, unlike the term hybrid, which “assumes the existence of two pure, authentic, and disparate originals prior to the new being that is formed” (221) and connotes a dilution of those authentic originals after contact, instead “relies on a dynamic, interactive relationship between a being and its changing environment” (221). The connotations of the dynamism and interactivity which characterize adaption provide a positive image of individual and authorial agency to the process of creatively responding to colonialism. Authors and Indigenous cultures and individuals are able to creatively adapt the multiplicity of their contemporary experiences by creating new categories of identification, which take into account their Native cultural heritages as well as interactions with Euro-Canadian culture without diluting or hierarchizing either component of their new reality. Rather than seeing these novels as bringing two different narrative modes together to reflect the hybridized nature of colonial reality, Aboriginal realist

texts, through their inclusion of Indigenous spiritual realities within the realist representation of Western culture, offer a new image of reality based on Indigenous perspectives and interpretations of the world.

In developing a critical framework from which to interrogate Indigenous literatures, Womack argues that “Native literary aesthetics must be politicized and that autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty serve as useful literary concepts” (11). Concepts of autonomy and self-determination relate back to the necessity of allowing Native scholars and authors to write their own experiences and stories instead of being spoken for or about by those with more political power. Many Native scholars see that “literature has something to add to the arena of Native political struggle” (Womack 11) and can articulate the historical and contemporary realities, be they political, communal, individual, or spiritual, being faced by Indigenous peoples across the continent. In terms of *Three Day Road* and *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, both authors rely heavily on Cree world views in order to articulate how their characters interpret and relate to their cultural environments. By looking at these novels from a politicized and particularized theoretical movement, an attempt can be made to “break down oppositions between the world of literature and the very real struggles of American Indian communities” (Womack 11). In investigating these works from this perspective, it will be possible to outline how the authors represent colonial effects on, and the attempted erasure of, Indigenous autonomy and national sovereignty, in particular through the residential school institutions and their religious influences. Rather than positing the authors or their characters as victims of colonial contact, this perspective looks at how the authors and characters analyze “their own cultures rather than deconstructing [their] viewpoints and arguing for their European underpinnings” (Womack 12). Because of the

content of these novels it will be impossible to preclude a discussion of colonial contact, but by looking at how Jeremiah, Gabriel, Elijah, Xavier, and Niska view their own traditions and communities, their place and identities as Cree individuals in Canada can be explored.

Rather than categorizing written works by Indigenous authors as a capitulation to western modes of literary representation, these works extend an Indigenous narrative tradition, which for the most part has been an oral tradition. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn states that Indigenous literature written in the nationalist tradition has its own set of unique aims such as “the interest in establishing the myths and metaphors of sovereign nationalism; the places, the mythological beings, the genre structures and the plots of oral traditions... [and] the treaties and accords with other nations” (qtd. in Womack 14). As I have been arguing, the spiritual traditions and cultural beliefs of the characters in the novels shape how they perceive and interpret the world and events around them. As such, these works are arguably establishing a form of nationhood based on the authors’ and characters’ “idea[s] of themselves, [and] their imaginings of who they are” (Womack 14). These authors and the characters they create present an image of Cree culture through the “ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature” (Womack 14). Though Highway’s use of the novel as a mode of expression may seem to indicate a move away from the oral tradition as a way of engendering meaning, his work can be interpreted as an extension of a Cree tribal voice in the contemporary world. Indeed, Highway has stated that he “wrote [*Kiss of the Fur Queen*] for a Cree readership.... I hope to reach the kids in the mall in Saskatoon and Winnipeg” (qtd. in McKegey 102). His desire to represent Cree traditions from a Cree perspective speaks to the ongoing project of creating a literature that reflects tribal and Indigenous nationalist tendencies. Boyden’s novel is arguably written for a

broader audience, as he has stated in an interview that he “didn’t want to go into the novel thinking ‘I’m going to teach every Canadian about Native involvement in the war,’ but it was definitely a passion of mine to want to shine a little light on a part of our history that so few of us know about” (qtd. in Wyile 222). However, the inclusion of Cree spiritual practices and ceremonies and his emphasis on the importance and healing power of oral storytelling, specifically through the character of Niska, reflects a specifically Cree perspective present in his writing. Though Niska focuses on the importance of oral storytelling in the novel, Boyden’s novel as a cultural object reflects the importance of keeping stories and histories alive, no matter what the medium.

### **iii. Cultural Narratives**

Following an elucidation of Indigenous Literary Nationalism, an overview of the major Cree narratives which inform the novels is necessary in order to provide the cultural context that shapes the characters’ identities and perspectives. Another reason it is important to include a section on these narratives is that they function as a theoretical underpinning of the experiences and knowledge of the Cree communities from which they stem. Most of these narratives have been transmitted orally over generations and so include valuable insights into these groups’ ways of thinking, philosophical beliefs, and traditional wisdom. Maracle argues that Aboriginal communities “humanize theory by fusing humanity’s need for common direction—theory—with story” (237), indicating the importance of all narratives, spiritual, traditional, and contemporary, oral and written, in creating theories for how one should live in and connect with the world. The importance of oratory, in her opinion, is its connection to a sacred spiritual being and its ability to present, through story, a culture’s accumulated knowledge:

We regard words as coming from original being--a sacred spiritual being. The orator is coming from a place of prayer and as such attempts to be persuasive. Words are not objects to be wasted. They represent accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of an entire people or peoples. We believe the proof of a thing or idea is in the doing. Doing requires some form of social interaction and thus, *story* is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people. (Maracle 235)

In light of traditional oral narratives' function of illuminating the theoretical underpinnings of a culture's belief systems and how they interact with the rest of the world, an understanding of the Cree stories which describe *wīsahkīcāhk*, *wītikōw* and the Son of Ayash will provide further insight into how culture shapes the characters' individual perspectives.

For narratives on *wīsahkīcāhk* and *wītikōw* (Weesakeechak, Windigo or Weetigo in the novels) I have relied on Robert Brightman's work *ācadōhkīwina and ācimowina: Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians* which contains oral narratives from Highway's Cree community. For traditional narratives on these figures in Boyden's work, I have relied on the collected, translated, and edited works by C. Douglas Ellis in *Átalóhkána nésta tipácimówina: Cree Legends and Narratives from the West Coast of James Bay* as this is the Cree community from which Boyden drew his inspiration. I will first give information on *wīsahkīcāhk* and *wītikōw* which is relevant to their configurations in the novels by describing some of their characteristics and the stories they participate in. Based on a comparison of these two figures, it will be evident that both novels have characters who seem to embody characteristics of both of these figures. I will then look at different iterations of "The Son of Ayash" narrative as it relates

to Highway's work. An understanding of these narrative traditions will lay a solid foundation from which to demonstrate how these authors use Cree worldviews to create positive Aboriginal identities and an Aboriginal realism that incorporates not only traditional belief systems, but also interactions with Western Euro-Canadian social realities.

Traditional Rock Cree narratives are typically classified as belonging to one of two different categories: *ācadōhkīwin* or *ācimōwina*. Robert Brightman explains that “[e]vents in *ācadōhkīwin* are understood as temporally antecedent to those in *ācimōwina* and comprise most of what is conventionally labeled ‘myth’” (6). The oral narratives which refer to the figure of *wīсахкїсāhk* (Weesageechak) are primarily associated with the *ācadōhkīwin* category and these stories contain accounts of anthropomorphic animals, powerful culture heroes, and marriages between humans or protohumans with animals or other non-humans (6). There is a difference between the world recounted in these stories and the contemporary world that emphasizes “that animals and other non-human agencies spoke and behaved like humans” (6), and that the landscape is recognizably different from today. An important differentiation between *ācadōhkīwin* and *ācimōwina* narratives is that in the first category “the characters are not persons of whom the narrators possess any direct knowledge or experience outside of esoteric contexts such as dreams or shaking lodge performances” (6), while in the second category the narrators either know the characters or have learned about them through human intermediaries. Although the narrators do not have direct knowledge of or experiences with the characters in *ācadōhkīwin* narratives, they are generally accepted as true stories of an earlier state of the world and though there may be multiple versions of each narrative, their veracity is not discredited because of an understanding that human knowledge of these events is imperfect (6). Most importantly, both

categories of narrative “may contain events and characters which are supernatural or non-factual from a non-Indian perspective” (7), though they are accepted as fact by the culture which perpetuates them. It is the general acceptance of these narrations and the characters contained within them which helps shape the way the Okimasis brothers interpret the events around them.

Much like the traditional Rock Cree narratives are divided into different categories, the James Bay Cree have several different types of narrative which fall under the broad heading of either traditional or popular discourse. The primary distinctions within the larger framework is between *âtalôhkân* and *tipâcimôwin*, though *tipâcimôwin* can be subsumed under either traditional or popular discourse. Like the Rock Cree *âcadôhkîwin*, *âtalôhkân* narratives take place in a time when the characteristics of the world were still fluctuating, animals and birds could speak, and disembodied voices “gave directions to isolated man” (Ellis xix). These narratives “display many of the characteristics of myth” (xx) and include stories of Weesageechak, the tale of Ayas, and some stories of Windigos. In contrast, *tipâcimôwin* are narratives about the historical past or an “account of some area of life experience” (xix) and are generally taken as recordings of actual events (xxi). Though Ellis seems to infer that the narratives belonging to the *âtalôhkân* group are perceived as less true due to their mythical qualities and locations, Regina Flannery, Mary Elizabeth Chambers, and Patricia A. Jehle point out in their study of Witiko accounts of the James Bay Cree that *âtalôhkân* “are believed by Eastern Cree to be as authentic as those narratives we label historical” (57). These narratives have shaped Xavier’s, and to a lesser extent Elijah’s, perspectives on the world.

*wîsahkîcâhk* is often subsumed under the broad category of the “Trickster” in criticism of Indigenous literature. Too often in the past, however, critics looked at only one aspect of the

trickster figure or made sweeping generalizations about his role in Indigenous literature. Fagan points out that in 1990s trickster criticism virtually any “humourous work by an Indigenous author seemed to be considered the result of the trickster influence” (“What’s the Trouble” 4). She goes on to state that the “trickster archetype offered a way of managing the issue of Indigenous ‘difference’ without requiring extensive research into the complexity of particular Indigenous peoples” (5). Indeed, when reading through the collection of Rock Cree and James Bay Cree oral narratives on *wīśahkīcāhk* in Brightman’s and Ellis’s books, respectively, it becomes evident that the “trickster” character is far more than a humourous shapeshifter. In addition to these standardized characteristics, we see that *wīśahkīcāhk* can be greedy and eat to excess, he can trick and be tricked, he can be vindictive, he can be cruel, and he can be lustful. Rather than viewing the idealized version of this character often presented in literary studies, “Rock Crees view *wīśahkīcāhk* with mingled contempt, respect, and affection” (Brightman 52). In light of the disparity between how the trickster figure is written about in literary studies and how he is perceived and talked about by the Rock and James Bay Cree, more detail on the exploits of this character is needed.

The *wīśahkīcāhk* cycle is not related in the same manner by the various Rock Cree oral narrators in Brightman’s volume, but it is possible to recognize similar themes, characters, and events in most of the stories. In terms of the distinctive characteristics most often emphasized in the Rock Crees’ discussion of *wīśahkīcāhk*, Brightman states that “the most important appears to be his ability to transform into other organic and inorganic forms[, h]is ability to converse with animate and inanimate objects, his trickiness, his foolishness, his use of the ubiquitous *nīsīmīy* ‘younger sibling’ in address, his sexual voracity, his continual hunger, and his modifications of



the environment” (53). Various sections of the cycle emphasize certain aspects of his personality and there are often connections between his behaviour from one section to another. The form of James Bay Cree versions of *wīsahkīcāhk* stories is not fixed in every detail, “but the theme and sequence... remain constant” (Ellis xxvi). Therefore, like the Rock Cree, it is possible to recognize themes, characters, and events from one narration to the next though individual details may be changed. Ellis points out that most *wīsahkīcāhk* narratives are divided into two parts. In the first part, *wīsahkīcāhk* succeeds in his trickery of certain characters (the dancing birds, the bear, the waveys) and receives what he wants. In the second part *wīsahkīcāhk* becomes overconfident and “relaxes his cunning vigilance” (xxvii) and at this point he is either tricked or receives his comeuppance. The stories then typically end with “an explanation of how Weesakechahk’s behaviour accounts for some natural phenomenon or points up a lesson in proper behaviour drawn from his misdirected activity or both” (Ellis xxvii). In the same way that certain stories of the Rock Cree *wīsahkīcāhk* cycle point out specific behaviours or personality traits, the James Bay narratives emphasize characteristics distinctive to this culture figure.

There are many similarities found in the *wīsahkīcāhk* narratives of the Rock and James Bay Cree, and though specific details may be changed, there are recognizable characters, events, and themes in both of the cultural depictions. A brief overview of several different narratives and the characteristics they represent follows, though it must be noted that some of the James Bay Cree narratives include details from narratives which are separate stories in the Rock Cree tellings. In the narratives having to do with “The Flood” (Cornelius Colomb) or “The Flood and the New Earth” (Jeremiah Michel), and “The Legend of Weesakechahk and the Flood” (Ellis 35), *wīsahkīcāhk*’s function as a shaper of the contemporary environment is emphasized, along with

his ability to converse with animals and transform into organic forms (a dead tree). The vengeful side of his personality is also indicated by his killing of the *misipisiswak* (water lions) after finding out that they have killed his younger brother in the first two versions, which are Rock Cree. In the stories “The Shut-Eye Dancers” and “Squeezed by Trees,” from the Rock Cree, and “Weesahkwechahk and the Birds, and Why the Trees Have Scabs” and “Weesakechahk Tricks the Bear” from the James Bay Cree, *wīśahkīcāhk*’s “trickster” characteristics and greedy appetite are emphasized (amongst others, including his vengeance and ability to shape the world). In “The Shut-Eye Dancers” he tricks water birds into coming into his dancing lodge by telling them he is carrying his *ninikamona* (“my songs”), then he proceeds to break their necks while they dance with their eyes closed. After Loon catches on, he kicks him in the legs. This kick is the explanation for how loons got their flat feet. *wīśahkīcāhk* then eats as many of the birds as possible and buries the rest for later (Brightman 23-4, Ellis 311). In “Squeezed by Trees” *wīśahkīcāhk* goes out traveling and the narrator (Jeremiah Michel) states that he “had eaten so many water birds that he needed to be squeezed in order to defecate so he could eat more” (Brightman 24), which speaks to his capacity for gluttony or greed. Certain narratives emphasize his transformative power (“Goose Transformation,” “Fly Transformation,” and “Moose Transformation” in particular). Other stories emphasize how *wīśahkīcāhk* sometimes does not listen to instructions and ends up doing the exact opposite with the expected consequences (specifically in “Eye Juggler,” “The Farting Hunter,” and “Muskrat Cools Grease” of the Rock Cree and “Weesakechahk Flies South with the Waveys” of the James Bay Cree). Finally, another category of story emphasizes the voracious sexual appetite, combined with the deceptive nature, of *wīśahkīcāhk* as seen in “The Women and the ‘Sickness’” and “Marries

Daughter.” These stories demonstrate the juxtaposition between “benign, malicious or stupid, and creative attributes” (Brown & Brightman 125) of *wīsahkīcāhk* and indicate that this figure represents more than shape-shifting or humour in contemporary Indigenous literature.

The depiction of the *wītikōw* in traditional Rock Cree narratives differs from its representations by other Objibwe and Cree groups in that it refers specifically to a “cannibalistic monster that was previously a human being” (Brightman 77). The Rock Crees do not “recognize a non-human ‘*wītikōw*-spirit’ or any kind of *wītikōw* lacking human antecedency” (77). Other groups, such as the Objibwe and some Swampy Cree will ascribe forms of gigantism to the *wītikōw*, but according to Brightman this was “not known to Rock Cree” (77). There are typically four ways recognized by the Rock Cree in which people could become a *wītikōw*. Perhaps the most well-known cause outside of the Rock Cree community is that “[p]ractioners of famine cannibalism were said to turn into them in some cases” (77). Other ways of transforming into the *wītikōw* include: “[P]ossession by ‘some kind of spirit’ associated with the North” such as the beings Ice or North Wind; possession through “the spirit guardian fast” wherein the person “may inadvertently acquire Ice or an existing *wītikōw* as his *pawākan* [spirit guide] and will then subsequently transform in later life;” and finally freezing to death: “people who freeze to death are said to become *wītikōwak*” because they “‘get cold air in their mind’ when they freeze and... their brains continue to function although the rest of their body dies” (77). When spring returns, they thaw and become “reanimated in a demented condition and seek human victims” (77). After becoming a *wītikōw*, victims may initially be able to conceal their condition, but they “inevitably degenerate into disfigured and mentally impaired creatures with torn and dirty clothing, long ungroomed hair, and lips and fingers stripped bare of flesh from autocannibalism” (77). In

Brightman's work, it is often said that the *wītikōw* disorder is considered the "only form of serious illness prior to the intrusion of the Whites" (78). In both of the novels, this disorder does not only afflict certain characters in the novel, but shapes the way the characters interpret or represent certain events or individuals. For example, in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* the sexual abuse which takes place at the residential school and the lasting impacts of Christianity on Jeremiah are connected with the image of the *wītikōw*. In *Three Day Road*, Boyden uses the image of the *wītikōw* to represent the residential school experience and World War One and has Xavier question whether Elijah has become a Windigo. In both novels, the *wītikōw* and its associated characteristics are imposed on the world of the novel by the authors and characters.

In many of the *wītikōw* stories related in *Traditional Narratives*, aside from the physical descriptions already stated, there are similarities found between the behaviours of the *wītikōw*, feelings brought on by their presence, and how they are killed. The *wītikōw* generally only come out at night ("Barren Lands *wītikōw*," "Laurie River *wītikōw*," and "P.B. and *wītikōw*") and often their presence can make an individual "feel lonesome," "tired," or unwilling to work or eat (Brightman 149). Johnny Bighetty says that "people begin to feel sad like that when there's a *wītikōw* somewhere going around" and it is postulated that these symptoms are brought on to make the victim more vulnerable to attack (149-150). Often the *wītikōw* will "consume their victims raw after first exerting a hypnotic or melancholic influence which immobilizes them" (77). In the narratives about killing *wītikōws*, "[a]xes occur with considerable frequency both in folk narratives and in accounts of executions as the instruments used to kill windigos" (*Orders* 168). Other methods of execution include drowning ("Laurie River *wītikōw*"), choking by rope ("Goldsand Lake *wītikōw*"), forcing the head into a pot of boiling water

(“Barren Lands *wītikōw*”), or being shot (“P.B. and *wītikōw*”). Once the *wītikōw* is killed, the body is often cremated to “prevent reanimation” (148) and in certain stories the fire does not stay lit, due to the association between the *wītikōw* and the beings of Ice and North Wind and the belief that it is “filled with ice” (“*mīsīl* Kills a *wītikōwak*” 140). The person cremating the *wītikōw* may have to rebuild the fire numerous times in order to ensure the body has been destroyed.

In his narration of “Repulsing a *wītikōw*,” Johnny Bighetty states that in “the old times every camp of Indians had to have a man who had the power to beat *wītikōw*.... These old men could tell when a *wītikōw* was coming” (Brightman 133). In both *Three Day Road* and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* there are characters who have the power to beat the *wītikōw*. In *Three Day Road*, Niska and her father are *hookimah* who are called on by nearby communities to deal with the threat of the *wītikōw*. In this novel the *wītikōw* is always killed by the *hookimah* and Niska’s father ends up going to jail because western culture classifies this act as murder. This situation draws attention to the different interpretations of reality between the Cree characters and the Euro-Canadian traders who impose western concepts of law and order on these communities. Interestingly, in the narratives found in both *Orders of the Dreamed* and *Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians*, the *wītikōw* is driven away or repulsed more often than he is actually killed. Often a *pawākan*<sup>3</sup> is used as an aid to help drive off the *wītikōw*, as in “Repulsing a *wītikōw*”: “The old man sent his *pawākan* to frighten that *wītikōw*. They tell that *wītikōw* to go

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<sup>3</sup> “The individual spirit guardian sought by Cree and Saulteaux during a solitary vision fast at or shortly after puberty” (Brown & Brightman 138). *pawākan* refers to “any nonhuman animate agent who enters into an enduring relationship with a human being, bestowing information, technical and spiritual abilities, and sometimes physical aid. In return, the human being is required to respect the *pawākan*, carry out its wishes and instructions and offer to it gifts such as tobacco, food, and manufactured goods” (139). It will be argued in later chapters that in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the Fur Queen herself functions as Jeremiah’s and Gabriel’s *pawākan*. For more information see *Orders* pp. 138-146 or *Traditional* pp. 75-77.

off in the opposite direction. And they scared him so that he went off and didn't come to where they were staying" (134). Other narratives related by the Rock Crees indicate that the *wītikōw* was typically killed only if he posed a direct threat to members of the community:

that old man turned and reached into his hunting bag and pulled out a moose antler knife... He looked right at that *wītikōw* and told him, 'If you'd left us alone, you'd be able to live. But I have to kill you because of what you've done to my children by frightening them and trying to kill them.' And he stabbed that moose antler into the *wītikōw*.... He only killed it because it was going to harm his family. (135)

In this narrative the man who kills the *wītikōw* explains why he does so and says he could have lived had he not threatened the man's children. Rather than positing the *wītikōw* as a monster who must be killed, these two narratives and others highlight the capacity for certain powerful individuals to drive away, rather than murder the *wītikōw*. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, there is a scene between Jeremiah and a female shaman at a pow wow in which "the monster gnawing at his innards, devouring him alive" (Highway 252) is driven from his body. This scene reflects the possibility of driving away, rather than killing, the *wītikōw* from one's body or location.

Unlike the Rock Cree whose *wītikōws* have a human antecedent, the James Bay Cree recognize two different types of *wītikōw*: one which is a supernatural, cannibalistic, anthropomorphized monster and a human *wītikōw* who develops cannibalistic cravings (Flannery, et al. 57). Though there seems to be no consensus on the physical characteristics of the supernatural *wītikōw*, he is "terrifying in appearance... [has] a heart of ice, enormous strength... the power to paralyze humans" and the ability to turn them into cannibals (57). Human *wītikōws* also have hearts of ice like their supernatural counterparts, are physically dirty and unkempt,

have white around their mouths and fingertips, and “have bad looks on them” (58). In the stories collected by Flannery et al. the supernatural *wītikōws* of the *âtalôhkân* are often killed and burned and human *wītikōws* in the “Long Ago Stories” to which none of the storytellers had any personal connection are typically killed by their intended victims. However, in the section of historical *wītikōw* incidents which involve either the storytellers or their family members, despite the historical precedence of killing *wītikōws* to prevent future murders, the *wītikōw* is only killed in one of these stories. Typically these individuals were either ostracized or watched closely by the community rather than being killed. Researchers believe that fear of legal retribution under the new government “may account for the reticence of the Cree in that area to discuss witiko killings” (59). These historical stories took place in the latter half of the nineteenth-century and recount actual events, so the possibility of intervention from outside authorities may have led to a shift in the discussion of *wītikōw* killings, and how communities dealt with them. Though *wītikōw* is not killed in these stories, there is a historical precedent of killing them for the protection of the community. Therefore, Boyden’s use of Niska, her father, and Xavier as Windigo killers in his novel fits with this tradition, though the methods of killing described in the novel differ from those found in the stories of the *wītikōw*.

A similarity between the *wītikōws* of both Cree legends is their association with starvation cannibalism. In describing their storytellers, Flannery et al. say that they “exhibited a level of matter-of-factness or frankness about witikos, starvation, and cannibalism that mirrors the realities of life in the bush” (59). This statement refers to the difficulties of living in the subarctic forest during the winter when game was often scarce and famine was a threat to survival. Because of these conditions many of the *wītikōw* stories take place in winter when the offender is

on the verge of starvation and death. There are even several stories which recount individuals who become *wītikōw* in the winter, revert back to normal in the summer, and return to their communities until the following winter. Flannery et. al. also point out that there are many stories which describe the great lengths to which individuals will go to avoid cannibalism (70) that may serve to teach listeners that there are better ways to survive than to turn on your community. However, they also indicate that there “are a number of instances in which individuals were forced to consume human flesh in the face of starvation but recovered without treatment to lead normal lives” (70). In light of this information, it is possible to see Elijah’s behaviour during the war as necessary for his survival and so question whether he actually goes *wītikōw*.

There are several iterations of the Legend or Story of Iyash<sup>4</sup> but certain structures or themes are found in most versions despite variations of specific details. In the beginning *ayās* is abandoned on an island by an older male relative, usually his father or stepfather, although in Caroline Dumas’ version in Brightman’s collection it is his grandfather. The story then follows *ayās*’s journey home to find his mother. He is initially rescued from the island by a giant serpent with horns whom he rides to safety. In all versions the serpent asks *ayās* to warn her if thunder is coming and when he fails to do so she is destroyed. However, in Dumas’s version of the tale *ayās* brings the serpent back to life by “scoop[ing] up the blood with the baskets he had made... [and hanging] the baskets of blood on *watīkwana* (‘branches’)” (Brightman 90). As a result, the giant serpent who calls herself *ayās*’s grandmother gives him guidance and advice which help him on his journey. In the tales recorded by Miighan-Kurt Co. and Keewaytinook Okimakanak First Nations Council, the serpent is destroyed before it can harm *ayās*. He then meets a lady

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the common spelling of Iyash used in several of the stories, I will use the spelling of *ayās*, which is closest to the spelling in Highway’s novel and is used in Brightman’s work *ācadōhkīwina and ācimowina: Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians*.



who gives him gifts and turns into a fox. In both versions, the initial benevolent figure whom *ayās* encounters gives him advice or objects to help him on his journey. In one version he is given animal fat, three stones, a piece of wood with qualities of meat, and large pieces of caribou and mink fur which he uses on his journey in order to render his enemies non-threatening or to escape (*The Story of Iyash*). In this sense, these figures function as spirit or animal guides who prepare *ayās* for the ordeals he must encounter. Brightman states that “*ayās*’s dangerous obstacles vary from one version to another” (95), but some examples are blind women who either sharpen their elbows (Dumas) or have antlers on their elbows (*The Story of Iyash*) to kill visitors, “treacherous sky hooks” (95), women with pointed teeth (*The Story of Iyash*), and old men or women who try to poison *ayās*. Due to the guidance and objects *ayās* receives he completes his journey and is reunited with his mother. Though Brightman claims that all “versions culminate in *ayās*’s reunion with his mistreated mother and his destruction of earth by fire” (95), Miighan-Kurt’s version ends with *ayās* working things out with his father and leaving home with his mother, an ending the narrator says teaches listeners not to “encounter injustice with another injustice” as this “only keeps the circle of injustice going” (*Story of Iyash*).

In the context of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway’s use of this myth echoes the forced exile of Jeremiah and Gabriel to Birch Lake Residential School (McKegney 164), and the tools *ayās* receives that “enable him to conquer the evils he faces and return home to his mother... alludes to the [the Okimasis brothers’] acquisition of valuable skills even in the context of institutionalized abuse” (164). The specific “magic weapons” the brothers receive include “language skills, Christian mythological knowledge, and emotional and intellectual depth” (165) in addition to musical and dancing skills. McKegney also asserts that the “magic weapons” given

to *ayās* “are not the sole product of the location of exile, but are also mediated by the instructive influence of the ‘ohkoma’ or serpent grandmother, suggesting the importance of traditional knowledge in rendering those weapons functional and empowering” (165). Therefore, the importance placed on traditional knowledge as a key component of empowerment and change once again echoes the need to regenerate a creative and constructive Aboriginal identity with specific groundings in culture and community to counteract effects of colonialism. On another level the story of *ayās* also provides a larger contextual framework for the novel, as we can draw comparisons between the benevolent animal spirit guardians in the narrative and the role of the Fur Queen. She, like the serpent or the foxlady, provides the boys with guidance (Jeremiah’s conversation with her in the fields of Northern Manitoba and her guidance at the mall) and gifts, like the tickets they receive on New Year’s Eve which keep them out of the bars and show them a whole new world of dance and music which inspires them later in life. As such, she performs the role of spirit guardian or *pawākan* (an idea that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two) and provides the boys with a connection to traditional knowledge culminating in Gabriel’s entrance into the spiritual realm upon his death. In light of the Fur Queen’s connection to the spirit guardians in the story of *ayās*, we see that Highway is reinforcing the importance of cultural knowledge and a reconfiguration of tradition to adjust for contemporary circumstances as imperative for survival and to heal cultural and individual wounds.

The contextual necessity for these stories lies in how they shape the characters’ interpretations and views of the world around them. It is important to understand that these narratives are considered to be factual accounts of the world and the different human and nonhuman entities within them, and as such, the allusions to them, or their inclusions in the

novels being studied, are not relegated to the realm of mysticism or magic, but are as real a part of these worlds as the different locations to which the characters travel. A familiarity with these stories will aid in an understanding of the characters, the narratives, and the different types of worlds these authors create.

#### **iv. Conclusion**

Looking at these two novels from an Indigenous Literary Nationalist approach illuminates how they function as models which represent that cultural and individual healing of colonially caused trauma requires a connection to healthy Aboriginal communities and traditions. By focalizing these narratives through Cree perspectives the authors create realities that are shaped by the characters' interactions with their cultural heritage and spiritual belief systems and show how these experiences influence their interpretations of the world. As such these novels are not solely artistic representations of Cree culture, but politicized objects which demonstrate a living and adapting Aboriginal reality that differs from a strictly Western, empirical representation of reality. They offer unique representations of the underlying factors of substance abuse problems in Native communities, specifically through the residential schooling and religious indoctrination that cause the characters to lose their cultural identities. Taking into account the traditional spiritual narratives which inform the novels, this thesis will seek to demonstrate how a reliance on Cree spirituality helps the characters regenerate authentic Aboriginal identities in order to heal the traumas they experienced throughout their lives.

## Chapter Two- Cultural Connections: Creating Survivable Aboriginal Identities and Realities

This chapter will look at the characters Jeremiah Okimasis from *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Xavier Bird from *Three Day Road* in order to demonstrate how they come to terms with their Aboriginal identities and how these identities shape the world of the novel. The majority of both novels depicts the perspectives of these two characters, though Gabriel and Elijah do influence the narrative world at times. Because the authors devote so much time to developing the perspectives and identities of these two characters, the realities created draw heavily from their experiences and interpretations. At one point both characters become disconnected from their cultural identities and communities, because of either compulsory residential school education or going overseas to war. Therefore, their identities are shaped not only by their Cree heritage, but also by their interactions with colonial culture. In Jeremiah's case, the lessons he learns at residential school cause him not only to become self-loathing, but to hate his community as well. His attempt to deny his Cree identity speaks to the reality of many residential school survivors who were victims of institutionalized racism and sexual abuse. Conversely, Xavier attends residential school for only a very short time and spends the rest of his youth living in the bush with his Aunt Niska. His disconnect happens while overseas. Though he yearns to be accepted by his Euro-Canadian peers from the onset, he remains rooted in his traditional beliefs up until he receives a letter which he mistakenly believes says Niska is dead. After this point he is no longer able to perform the sweat lodge ritual and seems to lose touch with his Cree heritage and reality. Eventually both turn to drugs and alcohol as forms of escapism. It is only once these characters reconnect with their Cree spiritual traditions and communities that they are able to commence the

healing process and stop relying on mind-altering substances to cope with reality. The reason Boyden and Highway may focus so much of the narrative on developing the identities and individual, yet culturally constructed, perspectives of these two characters is that they survive the traumatic experiences of abuse. They use Jeremiah and Xavier as examples of how individuals can acknowledge the damages inflicted upon themselves and their communities, recover from them, and help others heal by continuing the revitalization of Cree traditions and spirituality.

Though Xavier yearns to be accepted by his Euro-Canadian peers, for most of the novel he remains tied to his Cree roots and sees and interprets the world from this perspective. Many of his descriptions of the battlefields—the sounds, smells and sights—are in the same language used to describe his home in Northern Ontario or are similes connected to images of his youth. He builds sweat lodges, prays to his *manitous* before and after he kills, and keeps his medicine bundle around his neck for the duration of the war. He struggles throughout the novel to come to terms with his place in the colonial war zone and because he thinks Niska is dead he loses his emotional connection to his culture and community. However, despite his short-term fracture from community, he returns home and after undergoing a purifying sweat lodge ritual with Niska, regains his sense of identity and place in the world. Arguably, because he has not undergone the attempted assimilation or systemic attacks on his cultural heritage which Jeremiah endured at Birch Lake, his sense of identity is more readily regained. Jeremiah struggles with a desire to reject his Cree identity and assimilate into white Canadian society and is able to creatively adapt the Western influences on his life, specifically piano and the English language, to his traditional Cree heritage near the end of the narrative.

Jeremiah's identity is an amalgamation of his Cree traditions and heritage and the Euro-

Canadian systems which have shaped and structured his life. The creative capacity of Jeremiah's identity is most fully realized through the adaptation of his training as a classical pianist to his development as a playwright, which applies Cree mythology to the history of colonial and residential school damages inflicted on contemporary Indigenous populations. Jeremiah appropriates the tools and teachings of colonizing cultures by using his classical piano training and grasp of the English language to forge a new, adaptive identity for himself. However, it is through Jeremiah's character that some severe damages caused by forced attendance of religious residential schools are manifested in the novel. Jeremiah is able to overcome the sexual and psychological abuses he experienced at residential school, but it takes a reconnection with his community, initially by reforging his relationship with his brother Gabriel, then the wider Aboriginal community, for him to heal and through his work, attempt to help others heal as well.

Throughout the narrative, Jeremiah struggles to reconcile his Cree heritage with the Catholic teachings of the Birch Lake Residential School. Before attending the school Jeremiah was immersed in a world rich in Cree traditions and mythologies, though Catholicism did influence his life on the reserve. The differences between his life in Eemanapiteepitat and his life at the residential school and in Winnipeg are explicitly demonstrated early in the novel. For example, before attending the school Jeremiah's name is Champion, the Cree name he was given by his parents. There is also a connection made between the spiritual beliefs of the Cree and the natural world when Highway has Jeremiah help his father hunt caribou by singing to them. Jeremiah believes that "if [he] performed with sufficient conviction, the Okimasis family would be feasting on fresh hindquarter of young caribou before the sun touched the prong of that first pine tree" (Highway 23). This world is dominated by beliefs that are irreconcilable with

European empiricism, as evidenced in the above passage, which signifies Jeremiah's conviction that singing the phrase "*Ateek, ateeek, astum, astum, yoah, ho-ho!*" (Highway 23) will summon a herd of caribou. Indeed, the caribou appear after the "tenth repetition of the phrase" (23), alluding to its influence on the caribou and highlighting a Cree connection to the natural world.

Jeremiah's difficulty in reconciling his Cree identity with the Catholic teachings of the residential school stems from its systematic attempts at assimilation by eradicating all Cree beliefs and language from his identity. The first task of the priests at the school is to cut off the young boys' hair upon their arrival. Because his long hair symbolizes the freedom of his Cree background, Jeremiah feels that "he [is] being skinned alive, in public" (Highway 53) as Brother Stumbo shaves his head. Shortly after his head is shaved, Jeremiah tries to assert his identity by loudly and forcefully shouting his name, "Cham-pee-yun!" (Highway 53). However, the priests ignore him and state that "according to Father Bouchard's baptismal registry, [he is] named Jeremiah Okimasis" (54). Though Jeremiah attempts to protect his name, and therefore his cultural identity, the first step towards eradicating his "Cree-ness" has been taken, and from here Jeremiah will be taught by the school to resent and detest his cultural heritage. These teachings cause Jeremiah to struggle for years to fit into Canadian society by dissociating himself from the Indigenous peoples and the traditions and beliefs they embody. While at Birch Lake, he learns that heaven seems to be reserved solely for "beautiful blond men with feathery wings" (59), and as he searches among "the people rising from these graves to heaven, Champion-Jeremiah tried to spot one Indian person but could not" (59). The gap between races in the afterlife highlights the fact that the history and religious mythology which the Indigenous boys are being taught associates white skin with the bounties of heaven, while hell seems to be "where all the Indians

are” (60). The implication of this lesson is that the young boys will learn to associate their cultures with evil and sin, fostering a self-loathing which is embodied in Jeremiah’s struggle to create a positive identity which does not reject his Cree heritage.

For the majority of the novel Jeremiah is disconnected from both his Aboriginal community and Euro-Canadian society. After leaving the residential school, he lives a marginalized existence on the periphery of Winnipeg, attending a school at which he is one of three Native students, and immersing himself in classical piano. His physical location is not the only thing which disconnects him from his Aboriginal community, as the racist teachings of the residential school manifest themselves in his rejection of all the Natives he encounters in Winnipeg. Though initially Jeremiah believes that by leaving the residential school for Winnipeg he will be “free at last” (102), the reality of his situation is one of loneliness and isolation. The only thing he has to do is play the piano, and his desire to become ““the best goddamn piano player in Winnipeg”” (Highway 103) is symbolic of his desire to fully assimilate into Euro-Canadian culture because he believes the prestige of such a position will finally lead to his acceptance. His isolated existence reflects the racism and marginalization which historically has characterized Euro-Canadian colonial relationships with Aboriginal people.

In high school Jeremiah attempts to reject all aspects of his Native identity. When a new student, Amanda Clear Sky, arrives at his school, her presence immediately puts Jeremiah on his guard. Throughout the novel she is one of the few characters who consistently makes him come face-to-face with his Cree heritage and identity:

was it because this young—and undeniably Indian—girl confronted him with his own Indianness, which his weekly bus sightings of the drunks on North Main



Street had driven him to deny so utterly that he went for weeks believing his own skin to be as white as parchment? He had worked so hard at transforming himself into a perfect little ‘transplanted European’—anything to survive. (123-24)

This passage draws attention to many of the novel’s important themes, like Jeremiah’s self-loathing tendencies, which are a direct result of residential school conditioning, and the substance abuse problems which began negatively affecting Aboriginal culture after colonial contact. It seems that Jeremiah is attempting to mimic his white contemporaries in order to avoid association with his own people and in doing so he comes to embody the auto-cannibalistic characteristics of the Weetigo. In Rock Cree narratives, the Weetigo is understood to have previously been a human being and this group does not recognize a nonhuman weetigo or any weetigo lacking human antecedency (Brightman 77). Though the Weetigo may be able to conceal their condition initially, they “inevitably degenerate into disfigured and mentally impaired creatures with torn and dirty clothing, long ungroomed hair, and lips and fingers stripped bare of flesh due to autocannibalism” (77). Essentially the Weetigo “‘don’t look like a living thing. They look like they’re dead’” (Johnny Bighetty qtd. in Brightman 77). Many of these characteristics are ascribed to Jeremiah throughout the novel, and so he becomes a Weetigo, except he does not literally feast on his own, or others’, flesh, but on the intangible part of his person which is his Cree identity. Gabriel even goes so far as to say, “You’re dead, Jeremiah. At least my body is still alive” (Highway 207), creating an even stronger association with the Weetigo and his death-like appearance. In essence Jeremiah becomes Highway’s creative imagining of how the Weetigo is embodied and behaves in contemporary Cree culture. Because this figure represents a danger to Aboriginal communities, Jeremiah’s embodiment of it is fitting because his rejection of his

cultural identity and his community presents a danger to a living and adapting culture. If all Aboriginal people rejected their heritage in the same manner as Jeremiah, the culture and community would disappear. By blending Cree spiritual beliefs with realism, Highway is giving his readers a distinctly Cree, perspective from which to interpret Jeremiah's behaviour.

Though the entire narrative contains Cree spiritual beliefs and perspectives seamlessly blended together with elements characteristic of the genre of realism, the development of Jeremiah's inclusive and adaptive Cree and Canadian identity is a slow process which is only realized near the end of the novel. Jeremiah is unaware of the bloody history which marks colonial domination in Canada, and once again it is Amanda Clear Sky who makes him confront the "many bloody periods of human history" (Highway 148) which occurred in North America. Highway uses Amanda to illustrate to Jeremiah that his people have been largely overlooked by the official history books and that "the colonization of North America [was] every bit as bloody as the French Revolution" (148). Through the voice of Amanda, Highway raises issues about Indigenous history: not that Aboriginals should only be concerned with their own, but that they "shouldn't forget that [they] have a history too" (149). Though Jeremiah is not ready to accept his "Indianness," Amanda continues to force him to recognize that no matter how hard he tries to deny it, he is still only "one of three Indians in a school filled with two thousand white middle-class kids" (149) and as such he, Gabriel, and Amanda "can't let them walk all over [them]" (149).

A major issue that Jeremiah faces in accepting his Cree heritage is a belief that there is no place in the contemporary world for Indigenous ceremonies or spiritual practices. This belief and its distancing effects on Jeremiah are depicted during the scene where he accidentally attends the

Pow Wow to which Amanda has invited him. Upon receiving the invitation “Jeremiah recoiled. There was something so... pagan about the image [on the invitation], primitive—the word made his eyes sting—Satanic” (Highway 162). Pow Wows are not traditionally Cree, nor do they come from one specific Aboriginal tradition, but are a modern, pan-tribal phenomenon. So while Jeremiah is not rejecting his specific Cree heritage, he is rejecting a connection with all Aboriginal communities. This reaction is caused by the education that Jeremiah received at residential school, which essentially equated all Indigenous traditions with Hell, evil, and the devil. As a result of his indoctrination, Jeremiah rejects the invitation and joins his white peers instead. However, as he is dutifully “avoiding North Main Street” (170) or as he refers to it, “Indian Skid Row,” he is drawn into a church when he hears what he thinks is “a pail... being banged, with maddening insistence, to accompany a terrible yowling” (171). What he sees upon entering the church “took him by complete surprise” (171) as a “clutch of feather-tufted dancers [bobbed], while watching from the sides stood Indians civilized enough for jeans and other human dress such as T-shirts” (171). The language used to describe the Pow Wow and Jeremiah’s interpretation of it is indicative of his perspective on his own people. The description of “civilized Indians” wearing regular jeans and T-shirts echoes the language of residential school institutions that attempted to “civilize” their inhabitants. The use of the adjective “human” to describe this dress demonstrates that he thinks those practicing the dance are uncivilized and potentially even inhuman. In Jeremiah’s opinion the fact that this dance takes place inside of a church is “perverse” and he wonders, who “did these people think they were, attempting to revive dead customs in the middle of a city, on the cusp of the twenty-first century?” (172). His assertion that these customs are dead indicates that he thinks that they have no place in the

modern, civilized world and have been effectively eradicated by institutions such as residential schools and the Catholic church. As such he cannot accept their validity or associate any of these practices with his identity, especially because the northern people “lost all them dances... All them beautiful songs[.] Thousands of years of...” (175) of them due to the Catholic missions and so has no experience with his own culture’s traditional form of dancing. His rejection of all Aboriginal traditions effectively cuts him off from the community which could help him heal from the abuses he suffered. Instead he spends his youth trying to deny his heritage and six years of his adult life with “his skull pulsating with a hangover” (219) from the alcohol he relies on to escape his trauma and his identity.

A turning point in the novel in terms of the evolution of Jeremiah’s cultural identity comes after the death of his father when he has been working as a social worker at the Winnipeg Friendship Centre on the Street Patrol, “scraping drunks off the street” (221) for ten years. This turning point comes after Jeremiah has been drinking for at least two days and talks to the Fur Queen in the middle of the snow-covered wilderness. The entire scene reads like a dream, which is reminiscent of the vision fasts or dreams in which Rock Cree men acquire their *pawākan*, or “the entity conventionally referred to as the ‘spirit guardian... [which] can refer to any animate nonhuman agency that enters into a relationship of reciprocal obligation and support with an individual human”” (Brightman 75). Because the Fur Queen often appears as Gabriel and Jeremiah’s guardian, for instance giving them the tickets to the ballet recital, pointing them in the right direction at the mall, and finally taking Gabriel into the spiritual realm after his death, this figure arguably functions as the boys’ *pawākan*. Brightman explains that during visions typically “an animal or other entity manifested itself to the visionary, sometimes alternating between its

conventional appearance and human form. The entity addressed the faster, either telepathically or verbally, and provided songs, promises of assistance, and instructions relating to the dreamer's aspirations and objectives" (76). This description echoes Jeremiah's experience with the Fur Queen, though Highway has adapted this vision, and indeed the entity which appears, to Jeremiah's specific circumstances. The Fur Queen is an embodiment of Weesageechak and the vision fast takes place unintentionally during the drinking binge that follows Abraham's death.

After two days of drinking with relatives on his reserve, Jeremiah "escap[es]... with a bottle and his goose-down parka and find[s] himself inside a snowfall, a forest of crystals, the hush cathedral-like, as if the world had died" (Highway 230). The next part of the scene creates a dreamlike world where the laws of reality seem to be altered:

Where had it come from, this fog? He found himself peering into an endless tunnel, a flame appearing, disappearing, reappearing, teasing him, taunting him. He raised the bottle. His lips had no feeling. The walls of his heart had crumbled. The flame was fading. He would lie down, right there in the knee deep snow, and sleep forever. Where was he? The edge of the world? (230)

Highway places Jeremiah in an isolated area and has him enter an altered state of perception, albeit through alcohol, and it is at this point that he calls out for help: "'God! Someone! Help me!'" (230). The answer to his cries comes in the form of "a torch-singing fox with fur so white it hurt the eyes... missile-like tits, ice-blond meringue hair" (231). This figure is the Fur Queen whose appearance straddles the bridge between human and animal, male and female, as is made clear when she says her name is "Maggie Sees. It used to be Fred but it bored the hell outta me so I changed" (231). Maggie Sees is a playful spelling of the Cree word for fox, *mahkêsîs*, and

her ability to switch from Fred to Fox to female demonstrates her capacity for shapeshifting. It is during this scene that Jeremiah and the readers are told what the novel is trying to present as meaningful and necessary in life: entertainment, distraction, dreams, celebration, and “magic to massage your tired, trampled-on old soul” (233). She answers Jeremiah’s pleas for help and attempts to show him what his life is missing, why he is trapped in his job and feeling so useless, and why he rejects his Cree heritage. She is the catalyst who reconnects him psychologically with his Cree spirituality and starts him on his journey towards becoming an artist who celebrates and adapts his Cree culture to the various art forms of dance, music and theatre. A final lesson that the Fur Queen bestows upon Jeremiah is her opinion of Catholic religion, which helps illuminate how Catholicism has negatively impacted his sense of self. She points out to Jeremiah that God stands in opposition to almost every aspect of a meaningful life as she defines it: “Show me the bastard who come up with this notion that who’s running the goddamn show is some grumpy, embittered, sexually frustrated old fart with a long white beard hiding like a gutless coward behind some puffed-up cloud and I’ll slice his goddamn balls off” (234). Though the Fur Queen does not explicitly tell Jeremiah what he has to do in order to improve his life and reassert his identity, she intends for the information she gives him to be applied to his individual experience. Like a *pawākan*, the Fur Queen supports and guides Jeremiah and Gabriel, her very presence in their lives manifesting the magic which she claims makes life worth living.

Highway clearly associates the Fur Queen with Weesageechak, and in light of her self-designation as “Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap...” (233), she represents his creative imagining of what *wīsahkīcāhk* can look like, and how he or she can behave in the contemporary Canadian environment. In this case she is an anthropomorphized fox

drag queen who rescues those in need, specifically Jeremiah, and helps illuminate issues with which he is struggling. Highway's inclusion of names from other Aboriginal cultures which refer to figures similar to Weesageechak in their mythologies also nods back to the pan-tribalism of the pow wow, indicating once again that a potential form of Aboriginal identity can be reconfigured through connections with other Aboriginal groups. Since dreaming is "a modality of learning that possesses, for traditional Cree, a validity sometimes exceeding the data of conventional waking perception" (Brightman 6), the information Jeremiah receives about religion and life during this dream-like encounter can be interpreted as an authoritative statement on what Jeremiah must do to come back to life, so to speak. What he learns about cultural connections from the Fur Queen is more valid than all the teachings he received at residential school.

It is after this encounter with the Fur Queen that Jeremiah finally reaches out to Gabriel on a spiritual plane and shows up in the mirror at one of his performances and begs him to "*Weechee-in*. Help me" (238). Gabriel decides that the best way to help his brother is to "[p]ull him from the sewer... [take him on] a camping trip, to thaw the cold war of thirteen years" (239). The brothers decide to go to Manitoulin Island and realize upon arrival that they have accidentally come to The Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow. Even "after ten years of southern Manitoba pow wows—scraping drunks off the street... they still made him [Jeremiah] feel like a German tourist" (242). Though he is going through a spiritual crisis and has spent the last ten years of his life in "purgatory" (22), paying penance for the denial of his Aboriginality, Jeremiah still cannot connect with modern ways of being Aboriginal. Again, his disbelief that these events can exist in the modern world is indicated when he sees the cars of the people attending,

“Impalas, Pontiacs, Buicks, the Chryslers, Mazdas, the Cherokee Chiefs” (242), and exclaims, “[t]hese southern, eastern Indians sure are... twentieth-century” (242). Though Jeremiah still exhibits signs of self-loathing and disgust for his Aboriginal community, as indicated by his immediate desire to drink upon arrival at the pow wow, he begins to see that Aboriginal cultural traditions are still alive and are being adapted to fit into contemporary culture. Rather than the pow wow representing one Aboriginal community’s traditional ceremonies, it is instead a cultural adaptation of various traditions that represents a new way of being Indigenous in the contemporary world. The pow wow has the potential to show Jeremiah that there are different ways to connect to the larger Indigenous population and help him create a new sense of Aboriginal identity in the twentieth-century.

In order for Jeremiah to develop an identity that does not reject his Cree heritage he needs to rid himself of the loathing he feels for his own people. As mentioned above, Jeremiah’s self-loathing is an embodiment of Highway’s contemporary creation of the Weetigo, and significantly, Jeremiah is unable to accept his Native identity and begin to reconnect with his community until he has the spirit of the Weetigo driven from him by a female shaman at the pow wow:

‘Get out!’ Hot, rank breath blasted at his face. ‘Get out! Oh, evil spirit, get out!’ She was back! to feast on his flesh, devour his soul, her crown, her white fur coat, her eyes of fire. And she was clutching at his throat, squeezing it shut.

Chachagathoo, rising from her grave.

‘Get away from me.’ Like a two-year-old, Jeremiah sobbed. ‘Get away, get away, awus, awus, awus!’ ...



‘Leave this body at once!’ No. It was the monster gnawing at his innards, devouring him live, that Chachagathoo had come to get, not him. (Highway 252)

Initially Jeremiah believes that Chachagathoo, a Cree shaman demonized by the church in his home town for attempting to save a person who had become Weetigo, is trying to kill him. This belief signifies the extent to which he, and members of his community such as his parents, have been indoctrinated because of their willingness to believe Church officials over his own people. However, he eventually realizes that this woman is attempting to rid him of his poisonous self-loathing caused by his experiences at residential school, and is effectively trying to kill the Weetigo inside him. It is only after this experience that Jeremiah is able to reconnect with his Cree heritage and attempt a reconciliation between his “Indianness” and his experiences with colonial culture. This event can be interpreted as a legitimation of Cree beliefs and practices because the spiritual cleansing has an empirical effect on Jeremiah’s evolution of identity and acceptance of self.

After his experience at the pow wow, Jeremiah begins working at the Muskoosis Club of Ontario, “providing urban Indian children... with REC: recreation, education, culture” (Highway 269). Jeremiah has finally come to realize the importance of a connection with his cultural traditions, despite the fact that it is recontextualized due to his presence in the city. In this way he has become “part of a living and adapting culture” (Fagan 221) in which elements of his Cree heritage have been adapted to contemporary urban culture. The stories, such as the story of Ayash he teaches at the Muskoosis Club, provide the children with knowledge of their heritage and the possibility to learn Cree-specific ways of understanding the world around them. In addition to teaching at the club, Jeremiah also begins to recognize the healing potential of his

creativity by using the tools at his disposal, namely his skill at piano and the English language, to write and direct plays informed by Cree mythologies. Through Jeremiah's collaboration with his brother Gabriel, who is trained in European ballet, "the brothers are able to creatively interact with their own spiritualities and with a body of Cree spiritual knowledge in a manner distinct from the religious regimentation of the residential school" (McKegney 95). Like the novel, which blends the genre of realism with Cree spirituality to create a new way of looking at and interpreting colonial history, Jeremiah's plays fuse Native history and mythology, specifically the story of the Son of Ayash discussed in detail in Chapter One, with Western forms of dance, music, and theatre. In this way, Jeremiah is able to adapt his Cree identity in a productive and creative manner, effectively inserting his voice and his history into the Canadian cultural landscape.

In *Three Day Road* Xavier, like Jeremiah, survives the disconnect from his culture, and much of both novels is presented from these characters' perspectives. Though *Kiss of the Fur Queen* does offer more insight into Gabriel's character, most of what we see of Elijah is filtered through Xavier's questionable narrative voice. As a character who goes deaf early in the novel, his narrative reliability is undermined and compounded by the jealousy he feels towards Elijah. This jealousy is evident in Xavier's first narration: "They accuse me of acts I did not perform. Of some I did. We all acted over there in ways it is best not to speak of. Especially Elijah. He is the truly skilled one. But at one time I was the better marksman. No one remembers that. Elijah, he is the blessed one" (Boyden 10). This quotation from Xavier's first narration highlights several aspects of his character that will unfold over the course of the narrative. He says Elijah is perceived to be the more skilled of the two, though he has proven himself the better marksman.

Underneath this passage simmers a quiet, jealous rage, indicated by his statement that “no one remembers” that he is the talented one. Xavier feels this rage towards Elijah because unlike his residential schooled friend, he is not readily accepted by the *wemistikoshiw* and spends almost the entire book trying to fit in, while maintaining his ties to his cultural heritage. His jealousy of Elijah is culturally constructed by his desire to fit in with his white Euro-Canadian peers. He is affected late in life by racist attitudes and stereotypes which create an internal conflict in his identity as he tries to remain connected to his Cree heritage but longs to be accepted like Elijah. However, due to his shyness and the language barrier between him and the other men, which he does little to counteract, he is never accepted or recognized to the same degree as Elijah. As such, Xavier grows increasingly jealous of him until readers cannot accept what he says about Elijah’s actions at face value. His narrative perspective highlights this internal conflict and his ultimate disconnect from his culture upon learning of Niska’s apparent death. Like Jeremiah, Xavier struggles to fit into both worlds in which he finds himself; however, unlike Jeremiah he rejects the colonial world at the end of the novel rather than productively bringing both worlds together. He reverts back to tradition and is able to fully re-immense himself in his community and so recovers from his morphine addiction and traumas. However, this healing is predicated on an authentic Aboriginal identity that relies completely on traditionalism as opposed to the dynamism and evolution of Jeremiah’s identity.

Because Xavier attended residential school for such a short time before escaping to the bush with his aunt Niska, he does not have the same grasp of English as Elijah and so he feels inferior. He establishes this inferiority early when he says that he felt

stupid and small when Elijah had to explain that Belgium is a country, like Canada, and Flanders is just one small part of it, like Mushkegowuk. I'm still uncomfortable with the language of the *wemistikoshiw*. It is spoken through the nose and hurts my mouth to try and mimic the silly sound of it. I opt to stay quiet most of the time, listening carefully to decipher the words, always listening for the joke or insult made against me. These others think I am something less than them, but just give me the chance to show them what I'm made of when it's time to kill.

(13)

Xavier is constantly aware of his position in this new society of men and because he does not fully understand their language, most of the time he chooses not to talk, and often relies on Elijah to translate for him. His desire to prove himself when it comes time to kill comes up throughout the novel. He constantly states that he is the one who kills the Hun sniper famed for shooting his victims through the neck, that he is the better shot, that he is "the only one of the two of [them] truly from the bush, the only one who has hunted for a lifetime" (96), and that "it was [he] who taught [Elijah] the ways of the bush" (78). Xavier does this, arguably, because of his persistent feelings of inferiority caused by the racism he encounters due to his Aboriginality and so wants to assert that he is just as worthy as Elijah and the other men. By drawing attention to the fact that he is more talented than Elijah, he is trying to prove that he is worthy of being accepted by his new community. This speaks to Xavier's internal struggle between trying to stay connected to his community and traditions and trying to fit into white colonial society. As stated above, this struggle is culturally constructed due to his immersion in colonial life, and indicates another

damaging effect of colonialism: the internal struggle of many Aboriginal people who try to fit into both cultures at once.

On another level, Xavier's referrals to his superiority over Elijah demonstrate an aspect of Xavier's character, his jealousy, which will become important when talking about his decision to kill Elijah. He states that "Elijah can out-talk even the officers with his nun's English and his quick thinking. The others in our section are drawn to him and his endless stories. I am forced by my poor English to sit back and watch it all happen, to see how he wins them over, while I become more invisible. A brown ghost" (65). This quotation illustrates a tension in Xavier between his pride in his life in the bush and the skills it has given him and his jealousy of Elijah for his ability to fit in with the rest of the section because of his mastery of the English language. The jealousy grows as Elijah becomes recognized for his kills and his valour on the battlefield while Xavier reaffirms that he is the one who taught Elijah all he knew, is the better marksman and is often the one to finish the jobs that Elijah starts, though he receives no recognition for it.

Despite Xavier's desire to be accepted by his peers, he consistently tries to remain connected to his Cree traditions, spirituality, and language. Though he learns English he pretends he does not understand, and when "an officer speaks to [him he] look[s] at him and answer[s] in Cree" (78). As the ravages of war begin to effect Xavier and his company directly, he relies on his cultural traditions to remain grounded and create meaning within the senselessness of war. When Xavier and other members of his company bury Sean Patrick, Xavier states that he prefers "the old way of placing the body high in a tree so that the soul can leave it without hindrance" (112), and he "says his own prayers to *Gitchi Manitou*" while he and Elijah "burn a little sprig of sweetgrass... and whisper more prayers to drift up with it" (112). Before he and

Elijah go out on nightly raids Xavier reminds himself of the “animal *manitous*” (138) to whom he often prays after making a kill, and “[s]ometimes [he] send[s] up prayers on the smoke” (73) from his cigarettes. Though he initially starts smoking to fit in, he has adapted this habit to his own cultural ends, further indicating his desire to connect with both cultures. Like Jeremiah who creatively adapts his Cree traditions to life in colonial society, Xavier adapts his traditions to his experiences in the war and so establishes continuity between his life in the bush and his life in the war. By relying on his cultural traditions during times of senseless violence, Xavier remains connected to his heritage, and it is because of this connection that he survives the war despite his temporary cultural disconnect after the deaths of Niska and Elijah. Because of his survival and reconnection to community he is able to revitalize his culture, ensuring future generations will carry on the Cree traditions that he was taught.

In order for Xavier to survive the daily combat and routine of war, Boyden has him draw comparisons between his life in the trenches and his life in the bush. One of the first instances of this stylistic technique is when Xavier is on the ship going overseas. He remains below deck with the horses for most of voyage because he “feel[s] comfort with the animals [because] [t]hey make [him] feel closer to the land” (183) and describes the “boom of steel smacking water” as echoing “like the deep bellows of a wounded moose” (184). Another instance is a comparison made between the colours of a raging battle and the “dancing colours just like the *Wawahtew* [Northern Lights] back home” (198). The use of similes which recall life in the bush consistently reminds readers that the experiences in the novel are being presented from a Cree perspective. When life in the trenches becomes seemingly unbearable for other men due to the prevalence of pneumonia, skin irritations and trenchfoot, “Elijah and [Xavier] immediately think of

home” (199). For them, life in the mud of the trenches is reminiscent of when they “goose hunt along the rivers and sodden, soft shores of the Great Bay, [where they] live in cold rain for days on end and must learn to navigate mud. It is part of Cree existence” (199). Neither complain about the mud, but focus their energy on “staying alive and finding the little comforts” (199). By drawing similarities between life in the bush and life in the trenches, Boyden, and therefore Xavier, attempt to create a connection to home and tradition which protects Xavier from the madness to which Elijah succumbs. However, though these connections to his home protect Xavier for the majority of his time overseas, a letter he receives saying Niska is dead severs this connection and has negative repercussions on his sanity and, therefore, his reliability.

A key moment that demonstrates the importance of Xavier’s connections to home and family comes during the assault on Vimy Ridge. During Xavier’s rush on the German trenches the “world has gone almost silent in [his] head but for a deep hum and what sounds like the faraway surge of waves crashing on a beach and pulling away” (237). He remembers himself as a small boy on the shores of the Great Bay with his Aunt Niska watching over and protecting him. As he runs he “begin[s] to mouth [her] name over and over, like a protection against the bullets” (237). During his time of crisis, when his life is on the line and he has been shot, he remembers his aunt who saved him from residential school, who protected him in the bush and who taught him how to survive. He chants her name as if the power of her and of his home will protect him from the dangers he faces. Niska represents his familial connection to community and culture; therefore, the letter he receives from Joseph Netmaker which he thinks says Niska is dead directly impacts his descent into madness and his disconnect from reality and his Cree traditions. The letter says that he has to do whatever he can to return home because he is the last

in his family line, which he thinks means Niska is dead. Because of Joseph's inability to properly translate what Niska dictated, Xavier thinks she has told him that *Gitchi Manitou* will understand if he has to kill Elijah, though she actually said that *Gitchi Manitou* understood if he had to kill to survive and that he should communicate this to Elijah as well (301). Xavier's misunderstanding of the letter leads to his seeming rupture with his traditional past and the death of Elijah.

This letter has a profound impact on the proceeding events and Xavier's reliability because before he receives the letter, Xavier thinks that Elijah has already gone too far. Xavier believes that Elijah kills for pleasure as opposed to survival and so interprets the letter in such a way that justifies the murder of his best friend. He says that the "look in Elijah's eyes is frightening. I can only believe that this war has made my friend this way. Elijah, he will get better when we are gone from it, I think" (305). However, shortly after he remarks that "Elijah seems to have no more need for food. He is thin and hard like a rope. He is a shadow that slips in and out of darkness. He is someone I no longer know" (308). The allusions that Xavier makes to Elijah being a *Windigo* further justify Xavier's decision to kill him. When he was a young boy, he witnessed Niska killing a man who had gone *Windigo* from eating human flesh. This situation prepared him for what he thought he was being instructed to do in the letter. He constructs a sweat lodge to seek answers to the questions he has about Elijah, but though he tries to "master the pain. No prayers will come" (321). Try as he might, he cannot seem to get the answers he desires: "I think of the four directions, I think of you, Niska. I think of home. I try to see if you are truly dead. Nothing. I ask out loud what I should do, what I can do. Nothing. That you are gone and the letter is true, Niska, seems all too clear now" (321). Xavier thinks that the lack of answers he receives is indicative of Niska's death; however, since she is, in fact, alive, this scene



instead demonstrates that Xavier has lost track of his roots and his sense of self in this place of war, and is trying to use his Cree beliefs to justify an action which he knows is not right.

The scene in which Xavier kills Elijah is perhaps one of the most ambiguous in the novel due to the fact that Xavier has become disconnected from reality and his cultural traditions and so has lost his sense of identity. These factors are compounded by his deafness, which prevents him from hearing what Elijah is saying. During this scene Xavier hesitates to take out the machine gunner who is trying to kill Elijah, and once he shoots him the deafness returns and “the world is a dull buzz once again” (368). This entire scene is presented from Xavier’s perspective, and as he is almost completely deaf and has become increasingly paranoid about Elijah’s behaviour, his interpretation of the situation is suspect. His jealousy of Elijah, which starts the moment they join the army due to his desire for recognition and acceptance by his peers, could also be clouding his judgment. Throughout the war he has also had to kill in order to survive, so he could be projecting the guilt he feels for those actions onto Elijah’s. He believes that Elijah “says something to me, something I can’t make out in the noise” (368), and the rest of the scene is therefore clouded in ambiguity due to Xavier’s inability to hear what Elijah says:

*We both can't...* he mouths, and then a shell lands close enough to blow and suck a hot wind across us.

“What?” I shout, my eyes fixed on his lips.

*Leave,* he mouths, still smiling, his teeth glinting.

Elijah sits up and reaches as if to hug me. When his hands touch me, a cold shock runs the length of my body. I push him back.... Elijah struggles up and

reaches to wrap his hands around me again. He's no longer smiling. His mouth is twisting in an angry grimace. (368)

After this initial struggle, the two fight back and forth and Xavier claims that Elijah says, "I have gone too far, haven't I?" which, because of his unreliability as a narrator, is questionable. As stated above, his inability to receive answers in the sweat lodge not only speaks to his cultural disconnect, but also to his use of Cree beliefs to justify his actions. Xavier kills Elijah in the same way he had seen Niska kill the *Windigo* in the bush. He then takes Elijah's medicine bundle, ID, and other personal possessions, which is a symbolic act representing his assumption of Elijah's identity and all the glory that comes along with it. So while this scene could be interpreted as Xavier killing the *Windigo* which Elijah had become, Xavier's depiction of Elijah turning *Windigo* could perhaps be a justification based on cultural beliefs for eliminating the friend who had usurped him as the best marksman, hunter and Indian. The severing of his familial connection to his community is the final blow to his identity, which has slowly been eroded over the course of the novel. As such, it is unsurprising that he attempts to assume Elijah's identity in hopes of connecting with both the Aboriginal community and the colonial community. Ultimately, the ambiguity of this scene makes it difficult to ascertain exactly what Boyden is representing, but because of the perspective of the novel, and the unreliable nature of Xavier's interpretations, it would seem to be the latter.

Tellingly, Xavier becomes addicted to morphine after he disconnects from not only the war, but from his culture and community as well. His killing of Elijah severs the final emotional and physical connections he had to his home and community. He relies on the morphine as a way to escape or ignore what he has done to Elijah, and it works because in the present he constantly

wonders where Elijah is and says he should be with him. Early in his narrative he refers to the morphine as a *Windigo*: “Their morphine eats men. It has fed on me for the last months, and when it is gone I will be the one to starve to death. I will not be able to live without it” (Boyden 10). By characterizing the morphine in such a way, Boyden speaks to the destructive nature of substance abuse on Native communities and, as I have shown, connects this abuse with a loss of cultural identity. Niska recognizes Xavier’s sickness as more than an addiction to morphine, namely that he has lost his identity, as evidenced by his assumption of Elijah’s identity, and the connection to culture which it provides. He seems to have forgotten the name he received after his first hunt (362) where he saw the mating dance of the grouse. Niska says from “now on we will call you Little Bird Dancer” (363) and his community all agreed that “it was a good name for [him]” (363). She attempts to heal him by connecting him to his ancestors and heritage through storytelling, and when she tells him about how he received his name she states: “Now is when he will decide. I can feel him struggle” (362). Finally, she performs an act of purification in the sweat lodge so he can seek forgiveness from Elijah and so he can reconnect with his true identity as Little Bird Dancer, a member of the James Bay Cree community.

It is through storytelling and a sweat lodge purification with his Aunt Niska that Xavier reconnects to his culture and is absolved of his transgressions, indicating that a reconnection leads to healing and purification. There are two separate entities which enter the lodge during the ritual. The first presence is the “pain that [Xavier] has carried inside of himself for so long... leaving his body and swirling around in this place. It swooshes and screams and scratches at me until I think I [Niska] am bleeding” (380). By continuing to add water to the hot stones until Xavier “bends to the ground too, moaning and crying and whispering” (380), Niska is able to

drive out his sickness: with “the squeal of stone splitting in half from the heat, the presence is gone” (380). A second presence then enters the sweat lodge and it “isn’t threatening” but is “pure, and... fills this space. It is a young man [they] once knew who loved to talk” (380). This second presence in the *matatosowin* is Elijah’s spirit, which comes back so Xavier can ask for his forgiveness and complete the purification which Niska set out to achieve. Though Elijah forgives Xavier for killing him, Xavier states that “I cannot forgive everything you did there.... It is not my place to do so” (380), indicating that Elijah must seek his forgiveness from the *manitous* who he seemingly forgot during his time overseas. Interestingly, the spirit that enters the *matatosowin* is described not as “threatening” or “challenging” but as a “pure” entity from which Xavier must ask forgiveness, perhaps indicating that though he seemed to be acting the way his cultural traditions demanded by killing Elijah, he is the one who lost himself in the terror and madness of war. The success of this ritual illustrates that a reliance on traditions and spirituality is the key to preserving an Aboriginal identity despite the damages caused by colonialism and war.

If we look at how Boyden and Highway conceptualize the Windigo/Weetigo in their works we see that they represent the figure externally and internally, respectively. Xavier sees Elijah literally turning into a Windigo over the course of the war, and as such its representation is external to his sense of self. However, though the Windigo appears to exist outside of Xavier, this manifestation can perhaps be interpreted as a projection of a figure that he associates with death, selfishness, and murder onto an external source, which is a way of dealing with his own personal trauma and what he has done to survive. Because of the Windigo’s association with self-preservation in the stories Niska has told him, it makes sense that his guilt would manifest itself as a literal Windigo which he then projects onto someone he sees as behaving worse than

himself. In this sense, though the novel is focalized for the most part through Xavier, we actually learn about his identity through his construction of Elijah, which is based on his own cultural frame of reference. Because of Xavier's unreliability it is hard to accept what he says about Elijah as fact without turning it back on him. Boyden relies on an external and literal representation of the Windigo as it gives readers insight in Xavier's psyche and the Cree worldview which he is attempting to construct in his novel. Conversely, Highway relies on a semi-omniscient narrator, and though we get more insight into Jeremiah's character, he is not technically the one narrating. The tensions between the Okimasis brothers are never represented from one specific character's perspective and so we as readers are less inclined to see the entire narrative as unreliable or as favouring one brother's point of view. The use of a reliable narrator makes the narrative and the reality it represents reliable by extension. It seems counterintuitive that the novel narrated by a semi-omniscient narrator is more concerned with the internal world of its characters and the internalized application of the Weetigo, and the novel that is a first-person account of World War One is more concerned with the external world. However, Highway cleverly uses established modes of reliable representation (the semi-omniscient narrator) to establish that the novel represents a real development of Aboriginal identity. In doing so, the world of the novel, though it includes Cree spiritual figures and the expulsion of the Weetigo from Jeremiah's body, becomes not a magical land populated by fictitious spirits, but a different representation of a familiar country that includes the existence of nonhuman, living entities who have the capacity to shape and influence the real world in various ways.

Boyden's and Highway's constructions of their two surviving characters are indicative of their positions on what is necessary for cultural survival in the modern world. While Jeremiah is

able to take his traditional heritage and apply it to the context of his experiences with Euro-Canadian culture, Xavier must return home to the bush and away from a seemingly contaminating Euro-Canadian culture in order to fully heal. Though he transports his traditions overseas and relies on them for most of his time at war, he is only truly reconnected with his cultural community and Aboriginal identity within the traditional setting of the *matatosowin*.

*Three Day Road*, because of its setting in the past, does not interact with contemporary Canadian culture in the same way as *Kiss of The Fur Queen*. However, by placing his narrative in the past, it would appear that Boyden is trying to redress the historical exclusion of Aboriginal involvement in the First World War. This practice adheres to Gerald Vizenor's theory of survivance: "Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent... Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry" (1). Through the creation of Xavier and the illustration of how he retains his Cree cultural identity despite the attempts at assimilation and erosion caused by residential schools and the war, Boyden demonstrates a living Cree culture. However, the problem with this depiction is that he does not demonstrate a seemingly evolving culture, but one that relies on a complete reversion to traditional ways of life for its survival.

Allan J. Ryan claims that

*Three Day Road* exemplifies survivance in that it actively brings into the present in a richness of character delineation and historic detail a little-known history of Aboriginal presence in one of the grand master narratives of colonial construction that imagines Aboriginal experience as absence. The novel provides a compelling

counternarrative that honors the lives and historical contributions of Aboriginal peoples and offers entry into a world and world view foreign to many readers but made accessible through the skillful interweaving of stories that resonate with universal human experience. (297-8)

What is important to note here is that Boyden is inserting these perspectives into the past. Even the vision Niska has of Xavier's children at the end of the novel, though taking place in the future, relies on their being depicted in the "old way" (381). This depiction and the events that lead to it can cause problems due to a potential reliance on the trope of the "dying Indian."

Though Boyden is arguably trying to represent the dynamism of traditional Cree ceremonies and their potential healing power, by making healing possible only in this context he seems to be stating that the only authentic Aboriginal identity is one that relies completely on tradition and is untouched or uncontaminated by colonial contact. This conception of authenticity is problematic because not only does it ignore five hundred years of Aboriginal history, but also because in the contemporary world this form of authentic aboriginal identity and experience is virtually impossible to attain. In fact, it is akin to the type of Aboriginal identities Thomas King sees as stereotypes of Hollywood and North American culture as a whole. He claims that while it "would be reasonable to expect Native writers to want to revisit and reconstruct the literary and historical past... oddly enough—with few exceptions...—contemporary Native writers have shown little interest in using the past as setting, preferring instead to place their fictions in the present" (105). Though he does not attempt to offer a definitive reason why this may be the case, he does state that he believes Native writers discovered "that the North American past... was unusable, for it had not only trapped Native people in a time warp, it also insisted that our past

was all we had. No present. No future. And to believe in such a past is to be dead” (106). That is not to say that Boyden is relying on cultural stereotypes of Native identity to create his characters. However, when faced with the two characters in the novel, Xavier, who only attends briefly attends residential school, and Elijah who has no family, spends his childhood at residential school, and does not have solid connections to community, and Xavier survives, the novel seems to make a pointed statement about the effect of colonial contact on Aboriginal communities and their potential for a creative and adaptive present. What happens, intentionally or not, is that the novel supports an idea of Aboriginal identity and cultural survival that is contingent on traditional authenticity and a rejection and purification of the damages inflicted by colonial contact.

In this sense, it appears that through Jeremiah, Highway is demonstrating Simon Ortiz’s belief that “the indigenous peoples of the Americas have taken the languages of the colonialists and used them for their own purposes” (Ortiz 256). However, this act, rather than supporting arguments that claim this appropriation “means that Indian people have succumbed or become educated into a different linguistic system and have forgotten or been forced to forsake their native selves” (256), actually demonstrates that these tools “are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them” (254). Jeremiah’s appropriation of the tools he has gained through his residential schooling and the adaption of his childhood musical abilities to classical piano have given him a new “magic weapon” with which to counteract the overarching narrative of colonial domination. He creates new forms of artistic expression and cultural products which definitively show that Aboriginal culture is alive and well in the modern world and does not exist solely in the past, but has an active and promising future.



Highway's work also demonstrates how a connection to that community is necessary for the regeneration of a healthy Aboriginal identity. Therefore, unlike Jeremiah, who embodies the traumas inflicted on the Native community through systemic attempts at assimilation by various government bodies, such as residential schools, and who embodies a positive way to reconfigure Cree identity in the modern world, Xavier illustrates that the key to Native survivance is to be found in a reliance on traditional beliefs and practices while rejecting colonial influences.

Chapter Three: Residential Schooling, Communal Separation,  
and the Erosion of Aboriginal Identity

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *Three Day Road* the struggles that both Gabriel Okimasis and Elijah Whiskeyjack face in attempting to reconcile their identities with their Aboriginal heritage and their subsequent self-directed abuses stem directly from their experiences in residential schools. The residential schools abused them on two levels, one being indoctrination into Western racist ideals about their people and the other being sexual abuse committed by church officials. The institutionalized racism at residential schools across the country led many students to become ashamed of their Native heritage and so they learned to hate themselves and their race due to years of indoctrination which taught them that their people were savages in league with the devil (Miller 205). This type of prolonged exposure to the racist ideals of the missionaries who ran the schools further strengthens a disconnect between individual and culture as the children were not only physically removed from their homes, but also psychologically separated from the practices, languages, and belief systems which defined their communities. The erosion of identity caused by separation and institutionalized racism in some cases led to “prolonged battle[s] with alcohol [and other substances] and severe personal and family problems, until [individuals] came to grips with the perverse teachings to which [they] had been exposed in residential school” (205). This indoctrination was exacerbated in the twentieth-century because there was a “growing emphasis... on the use of residential schools for orphans, children of broken or troubled homes, and youngsters whose behaviour could not be handled in day schools” (313). Not only did these children have “no adult members of their immediate family to take interest in their treatment, or to whom [they] could complain about what they

considered inadequate, neglectful, or abusive supervision” (314), but they also lacked the community and cultural support system which could balance or counteract the institutionalized racism and abuse experienced at the schools.

Elijah represents the orphaned children as he was put into residential school at a young age and, unlike Xavier, who had an aunt to rescue him from the school and provide him with a connection to community and culture, he remained there until he was old enough to leave. At that point he had internalized Western opinions of Indigenous life. However, even if the students had families to which they could go for help, as in Gabriel’s case, the conditions of sexual abuse “made it difficult for them to tell their families [because in] many cases they had been raised by Christianized parents to regard missionaries as holy people who were there to assist them” (Miller 336-37). Highway indicates that the Christianization of Gabriel and Jeremiah’s parents did cause a disconnect between the brothers and their parents, as Jeremiah tells Gabriel that “Even if we told them, they would side with Father Lafleur” (92). Therefore, “[c]hildren who were victimized usually had no means of defending themselves or getting help from others. The child-victims often had nowhere to take the anger and hurt they felt, and all too often victims responded by taking these emotions out on themselves” (Miller 337). Sadly, both Gabriel and Elijah turn the abuses they experienced back on themselves through their reliance on dangerous sexual activity and drugs, respectively, as integral aspects of their identities.

In light of the characters’ experiences at residential schools, there are several similarities between them which make a comparison between the two figures a productive way of interpreting how the authors create their specific cultural perspectives. The most notable similarity between the characters is that both die at the end of the novels. As stated before, the

authors incorporate Cree spiritual elements in the novels to create a specifically Cree interpretation of reality and by looking at these two characters we can see the reality which informs their identities. This reality has at its roots the sexual and cultural abuse which the boys experience at their respective residential schools. Over the course of their lives both characters develop different types of addictions which negatively impact their health and well-being. Elijah becomes addicted to morphine during the war, a behaviour that can be interpreted on two levels. The morphine allows him to escape the reality of life in the war and also disconnects him from the pain caused by his abusive experiences at residential school. It is his addiction to morphine which leads to his degraded appearance and, indirectly, his behaviour while on morphine leads to his death at the hands of Xavier. Gabriel becomes addicted to sex and risky sexual behaviour. His addiction can be interpreted as an unsuccessful way of reconfiguring the sexual abuse he received at residential school in his own terms by making himself the person in control of his sexual encounters. However, this behaviour leads to his death due to his contraction of HIV and so he never fully recovers from the abuses he experienced. In light of the importance a grounding in one's community and culture has on one's ability to heal from past traumas, the characters' deaths make a statement on what the authors see as lacking in these two characters. In other words, their deaths speak to an inability to reconcile their identities with their Aboriginal communities and cultures.

The characters' inability to reconcile their identities with their cultures can be problematized because in death both characters seem to enter the Cree spiritual realm. Where Jeremiah and Xavier are both able to overcome the traumas they experienced through a reconnection with cultural tradition and community, Gabriel and Elijah are unable to survive

these traumas in the same way. In Elijah's case Boyden seems to indicate through his death that his removal from his community at such a young age and the cultural conditioning he underwent at residential school could not be counteracted by the few years he spent in the bush with Niska and Xavier. Elijah believes Aboriginal identity is defined by the stereotypes he learned about his people at residential school and so is unable to locate his identity in any positive connection to community or culture. Gabriel on the other hand, shows an interest in his community and culture throughout the novel: He often stages Catholic plays, but speaks in Cree while doing so, he argues with Jeremiah about the validity of Catholicism in relation to Cree spiritual beliefs, and he shows an interest in learning about his cultural history. However, he also struggles with communicating with his parents because there are no words for ballet dancer or AIDS in Cree, which signifies not only a disconnect between language, but also a disconnect in realities between him and his community. Though Highway seems to indicate through Gabriel's death that there are some abuses too great to overcome, Gabriel's move to the spiritual realm at the end of the novel demonstrates that a recognition of colonial forces and their devastating effects will help create a more productive and adaptive sense of Cree culture. In the future, Jeremiah will use Gabriel's story to teach others how to overcome such abuses.

Though the deaths of the two characters provide an important area of examination in terms of how they are unable to reconcile their identities with their Aboriginal heritage, other similarities between Gabriel and Elijah speak to their individual realities as they are created by themselves or by other characters who interpret them. Both characters are associated with the figure of the Weetigo or Windigo depending on which novel is being discussed. Though it is unclear whether or not Elijah actually goes Windigo in the novel, Xavier's belief that he has

leads to his association with the figure. In this way Xavier's representation of Elijah as Windigo is explicit, though as I have pointed out there is room for interpretation on that account. Gabriel, much like Jeremiah, embodies the Weetigo in a different way. He is not harming others in his community, but has turned the destructive nature of the Weetigo onto himself. However, there is one point in the novel after he learns he has HIV where he participates in sexual activity with another man despite his diagnosis. This final act, rather than being an active violence on Gabriel's behalf, could instead be interpreted as his reliance on his addiction in a time of confusion and crisis. After this final sexual act he accepts his sickness and with the support of Robin Beatty makes it through the plays he and his brother had been working on. There is also cannibalistic imagery associated with Gabriel's sexual encounters and his encounters with the church. Both characters ostensibly become Windigo or Weetigo due to their traumatic experiences with colonial forces, specifically residential schools and the sexual abuse they suffered therein. In this way, their identities are based on the traumatic aspects of Aboriginal identity and illustrate the damages which have been inflicted by colonialism on an individual level, and on a broader scale of representation, Aboriginal communities as a whole. Not all individuals who were forced to attend residential schools survived or were able to move past the abuses they suffered during their lifetimes, and these two characters act as stand-ins to illustrate the continuing negative effects these schools have on Aboriginal communities and identities.

While the Weetigo functions as a symbolic representation of Catholicism and consumer capitalism in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, it is also embodied within the characters of Jeremiah and Gabriel. Though Cynthia Sugars claims that "an encounter with the Weetigo functions as a metaphor for self-knowledge" (78), it may be more fitting to state, because of its associations

with priests and sexual abuse throughout the novel, that the Weetigo figure represents the damages wrought on Gabriel and Jeremiah by their contact with and abuse by the colonial force of the Catholic church. As a symbol of these institutions of colonialism, the Weetigo functions well in that it represents a danger to Aboriginal communities in times of crisis. The first missionaries come to Eemanipitipit during a period of starvation in which an individual has become Weetigo and is endangering the entire community. Rather than let Chachagathoo eliminate the Weetigo, the church has her arrested and their removal of the last female shaman has the church replace the Weetigo as the biggest threat to the community. Even when the Weetigo is associated with the boys, it is implied that it is the church that has spread this sickness, leading to a fracturing of the Cree community. Gabriel manifests Weetigo sickness through the self-destructive sexual behaviour that ultimately leads to his death by an AIDS-related illness, pneumonia. His insatiable appetite for sexual encounters mirrors or parallels the Weetigo's insatiable and destructive hunger for flesh (Sugars 79). In Rock Cree mythology the Weetigo feeds on his own body, as demonstrated by the descriptions of chewed skin around its lips and fingers. As such, it is fitting that the Weetigo represents the self-destructive tendencies of Gabriel as he ostensibly "feeds" on his own body by damaging it through sexual encounters.

Weetigo imagery is often invoked during Gabriel's encounters with the church through cannibalistic imagery associated with eating the body of Christ and the arousal Gabriel often feels in the presence of religious figures. Notably, before the scene where he is sickened by eating the host and choked by the feeling of entrails in his throat, Gabriel is initially aroused by the priest and later they engage in sexual activity. Immediately after Gabriel eats "the raw meat dangling from his [the priest's] fingers" (181) and savours "the dripping blood as it hit his

tongue” (181), he explodes into laughter at a joke “so ludicrous, [a] sham so extreme” (181). Here we see an example of the resistance to Catholicism Gabriel demonstrates throughout the novel enacted in church in the face of the priest. The images of “dripping blood” and “raw meat” draw a connection between the cannibalistic act of eating the body of Christ during communion and the cannibalism associated with the Weetigo. In this sense, then, the religious act is reconfigured as barbaric and further strengthens the connection throughout the novel of the Catholic church and the Weetigo. Gabriel recognizes the inherent hypocrisy of Catholicism when he draws attention to the wars that have had religion at their root and the men who beat their wives “while the host is still melting on their tongues” (183). He also draws attention to the violence inherent in this religion when he states that the cross is “an instrument of love. If you’re into whips and chains and pain” (184), and in the context of the Weetigo imagery associated with Catholicism and priests throughout the novel, readers get the sense that Gabriel’s perspective on religion reflects Highway’s opinion of the damages it has inflicted on Canadian Aboriginal individuals and communities. The associations of the Weetigo with the Catholic church and Gabriel’s self-destructive behaviour highlight the specifically Cree representation of reality which Highway constructs through his characters and content. Religion and the effects it has on Gabriel’s identity and behaviour are then reconfigured in the context of a Cree cosmology which at once highlights the negative impact of Catholicism on Cree culture and community, while simultaneously reaffirming the existence and continuation of that culture despite efforts to eradicate it.

Though the Weetigo is associated with Gabriel, it is in the context of the sexual and physical abuses he experienced at residential school. We have seen that the priest who initially



sexually abuses Gabriel is characterized as “the Weetigo feasting on human flesh” (Highway 79) and that the act of communion is associated with the cannibalistic nature of the Weetigo. Another aspect of Gabriel’s identity that is rife with Weetigo imagery is his sexual identity which, for better or worse, is inextricably linked with his experiences at residential school. It is at residential school that Gabriel first becomes aware of a connection between pleasure and pain, a motif present throughout the novel, and which will shape his sexual experiences from childhood onwards: “‘Bleed!’ a little voice inside of Gabriel had cried. ‘Bleed! Bleed!’ He wasn’t going to cry. No sir! If anything, he was going to fall down on his knees before this man and tell him he had come face to face with God, so pleasurable were the blows” (Highway 85). Jennifer Henderson has stated that “Gabriel’s intention to express pleasure may be a planned ruse, a means of resisting a punishment that seeks to weaken him. However, at the same time there is the suggestion that he has learned this complex posture of agential masochism through an identification with Jesus” (185-86). Whenever the boys act out scenes from the Bible, Gabriel always takes on the role of Jesus; however, though he plays a figure representative of Catholic suffering and pain, he often peppers these plays with Cree language and song, such as *Kimoosoom chimasoo*, which signifies a resistance to Catholicism that he enacts from a young age. Henderson also points out that though Gabriel resists complete assimilation into colonial ways of life, it is this resistance which brings about the punishments and the enjoyments he gets from them, ultimately dissolving “the distinction between Gabriel’s spirit of revolt and his enjoyment of a pleasure that is predicated on the very prohibitions he rebels against” (186). The complexity of his enjoyment is further illustrated through the simultaneous representations of the Weetigo and images of his home (fireweed and honey, for example) during sexual encounters.

Gabriel's sexual encounters often mirror the sexual abuse he received at residential school. However, Gabriel uses these encounters to regain control over his body and as an attempt to transform earlier abuses. Jennifer Henderson claims that "Sexual practices with an overtly performative dimension that risk the repetition of scenes of sexual abuse through, for example, relations of dominance and submission, set in motion the power of ritualized repetition to effect differentiations and to transform earlier scenes of violence" (189). In this way, Gabriel becomes an active agent in the creation of his sexual identity, and rather than deny his abuses like Jeremiah, he celebrates the fact that his body is alive. He is often the one who seduces his sexual partners. For example, his knowledge that he "had induced a flashing spasm in the holy man's gaze" (181) leads to "Gabriel Okimasis [getting] to know the mouth-watering Father Vincent Connolly in a way that had him yodelling '*weeks 'chiloowew!*' by nine that evening" (185). Gabriel's seduction of men in his own terms, though sometimes violent and dangerous, puts him in control of his sexuality and the abuse he received at a young age so that these sexual encounters attempt to "counter victimization and loss of memory" (Henderson 191). Though his sexual behaviours ultimately result in his self-destruction, he emphasizes that "[a]t least my body is still alive" (Highway 207). There is a paradox, then, in Gabriel's behaviour as it is what leads to his death but also what seems to be the only thing keeping him alive. Gabriel shows a dependency on this sexual behaviour which is akin to a dependency on drugs or alcohol and leads to the same negative outcome. So though Gabriel thinks this behaviour is helping him cope, Highway shows that his configuration of healthy sexuality has been warped due to his experiences at residential school and in so doing tells his readers that Gabriel's method of healing is not viable, productive, or sustainable in the long run without causing harm to

individuals and community.

The importance of the image of the cross in Gabriel's sexual identity stems from his first sexual encounter with Father Lafleur when the "naked Jesus Christ...rub[bed] his body against the child's lips, over and over and over again" (78). From then on he associates Jesus, his suffering on the cross, and by extension Catholicism, with sexuality. Though Weetigo imagery is not used in all scenes depicting his sexual activity, the association of Catholicism and the Eucharist with this figure implicitly connects the destructive, violent nature of the Weetigo with a sexuality that is based on residential school abuse. That is not to say that Gabriel is homosexual because of his experiences, or that Highway is suggesting that abuse leads to homosexuality, rather that the nature of Gabriel's masochistic enjoyment of sex stems from his initial encounters with Father Lafleur. This depiction of a sexual encounter links the cross to Weetigo imagery:

And the body of the caribou hunter's son was eaten, tongues writhing serpent-like around his own, breath mingling with his, his orifices punctured and repunctured, as with nails.

And through it all, somewhere in the furthest reaches of his senses, the silver cross oozed in and out, in and out, the naked body pressing on his lips, positioning itself for entry. Until, upon the buds that lined his tongue, warm honey flowed like river water over granite. (168-9)

In the first paragraph of this scene the image of Gabriel being eaten is combined with that of him being punctured, "as with nails" like Jesus on the cross. And though he is perhaps unconscious of the connection to his first sexual encounter, as revealed by the statement "in the furthest reaches of his senses," the image of the cross and the body of Christ rubbing against his lips is present,

indicating the underlying danger and violence inherent in this, and his other, sexual experiences.

Due to the sheer volume of Gabriel's dangerous and often violent sexual encounters it is unsurprising that he eventually contracts HIV. It is this sickness which ultimately leads to his death. The associations between Jesus, his sacrifice, and Gabriel lead to the conclusion that Gabriel acts as a sacrificial victim of colonialism and residential schooling. Rubelise da Cunha states that "[a]lthough living his [Gabriel's] homosexuality also represents a choice to overcome the trauma of sexual abuse, his masochistic experiences, which lead him into prostitution and self-destruction, point to the negative consequences of the violence undergone at residential school" (108). As representative of a large portion of the Aboriginal community who experienced sexual abuse at residential schools, Gabriel's death signals that some traumas cannot be overcome in life and that part of the community will have great difficulty recovering. However, though Gabriel does not survive, he is taken into the spiritual realm by the Fur Queen who acts as a spiritual guide and counterpoint to Catholicism. The image of Gabriel as a sacrificial Christ figure and his entrance into the spiritual realm with the Fur Queen demonstrates an Aboriginal perspective on the effects of colonialism and residential schooling on diverse communities throughout the nation. Though Gabriel is associated with Jesus, the final resting place of Gabriel's soul is not in the Catholic-created heaven, but with his own spiritual ancestors. This connection to a Cree spiritual community speaks to Gabriel's capacity to overcome the religious influences in his life and to reconnect with his Cree spirituality, community, and ancestors. Highway is demonstrating through Gabriel's struggles with identity, sexuality, and self-destruction many of the difficulties Aboriginal people have to overcome in order to develop a complete sense of identity and recover from addictions and other self-destructive behaviours.

Gabriel does not deny his abuse like his brother, but attempts to celebrate his body and his life through dance and his sexuality, despite the fact that it is his sexuality which precludes the possibility of him being fully accepted by his Aboriginal community.

The ideological systems which underlie the Aboriginal community's rejection of Gabriel based on his sexual orientation have their foundations in Western modes of understanding sexuality and gender. McKegney has stated that the brothers' initial "failing to break out of the ideological system imposed on them by forces of evangelical Christianity" prevents them from "unlock[ing] the empowering capacity of traditional Cree thought" (*Magic Weapons* 166). An example of an ideological system which continues to harm Aboriginal communities is in the way that Gabriel is treated by the Aboriginal community at the Wasaychigan Hill Pow Wow. As a homosexual Gabriel is taunted and rejected by his community and even his own brother who is "embarrassed to be caught in cahoots with a pervert, a man who fucked other men... [on] an Indian reserve, a Catholic reserve" (Highway 250). The language used in this quotation indicates a fundamental problem Highway sees in the Aboriginal community, namely that their spiritual belief systems have been replaced because of the indoctrination of Western ideology through the systemic oppression of the Catholic church. Gabriel's rejection, then, is predicated on a Western ideological system which sees homosexuality as a sin and a perversion of the culturally constructed gender roles of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, the men who reject Gabriel because of his perceived embodiment of feminine characteristics due to his homosexuality and ballet dancing, do so because of a fundamental misunderstanding "of feminine creative power as disempowering to Native men" (*Magic Weapons* 168). Highway draws attention to colonially imposed systems of misogyny which have damaged Aboriginal communities when he has

Gabriel look at the men and see terror in their eyes instead of hatred. Gabriel wonders of what they are so terrified: “The fact that the flesh of the mother had formed their flesh, female blood ran thick inside their veins? Terror that the emotion of a woman, the spirit of a woman, lived inside them?” (Highway 251). By having these men interpret “femininity without reference to either Cree or Ojibway traditional teachings” (*Magic Weapons* 169) and rely on a Western perspective of sexuality and gender, Highway makes a statement on a sickness present in his community which needs to be cured before healing can take place on an individual level. It is the rejection by his own community that leads to Gabriel’s death. As the ability to heal depends on the health and well-being of the community, the perpetuation of sexist ideologies prevents the community from providing Gabriel with the help he requires to heal from his experiences of abuse. Therefore, in the novel he has to die in order to show Jeremiah that there is another damaging effect of colonialism that needs to be rectified before true cultural healing can take place on a large scale. The importance of the feminine in Cree spirituality and culture must be relearned and reimposed before true empowerment can take place because without acknowledging the cultural wound that misogyny systemically enacts on all community members, individuals will be unable to recreate positive Aboriginal identities which survive and thrive in the contemporary world.

Though Gabriel dies at the end of the novel, his identification as a sacrificial victim of colonialism (Cunha 107) make his death necessary so that Jeremiah can live and continue to recover Cree heritage in a contemporary context. His sacrifice shows Jeremiah that a sickness still exists within his culture and that in order to recreate authentically Aboriginal communities and by extension identities, Jeremiah must educate his people on the causes of this sickness and

how to counteract it. The Fur Queen, who functions as the figure of Weesageechak in the novel, takes Gabriel into a spiritual realm, away from the Weetigo figure and its associations, where Cree traditions have survived and God and Catholicism have been outwitted by Weesageechak (Cunha 112). In this way Highway demonstrates that Cree traditions, as embodied in the Fur Queen, persist and prosper in Canada under new guises (113). Arguably, Gabriel is accepted into the spiritual realm because his ancestors do not rely on Western ideological understandings of gender and sexuality and the spiritual system with which he is reconnected accepts, rather than rejects, his supposed femininity. In this sense, Gabriel's life story embodies the story of Weetigo and Weasel which he relates to Jeremiah at the mall, in that it is the Fur Queen/Weesageechak who saves him from the Weetigo and its associations by taking him into the Cree spiritual realm. Rather than functioning solely as symbol of loss in the novel, his death helps Jeremiah recognize the damages wrought on his community by colonial forces and forces him to stop repressing the abuses he experienced at residential school. It is through Gabriel's death that Highway's epigraphical quotation by Chief Seattle of the Squamish—"For the dead are not powerless"—is realized, for Gabriel's death will have a ripple of positive effects on the Aboriginal community as a whole.

Like Highway, Boyden associates the figure of the Windigo with colonial institutions which have wreaked havoc on Native Canadian communities. In particular the Windigo is associated with Elijah's residential school experience and by extension the nuns who sexually abuse him and who attempt to beat the Indigeneity out of the students at the school. The school, like the Windigo, is insatiable and feasts on Aboriginal communities and individuals, leaving many of its students in worse conditions than they were in before. Xavier's mother Rabbit, for

example, became an alcoholic and abandoned her son to the school. On another level the Windigo is associated with war as an insatiable entity of destruction, death, and madness. If Elijah does indeed become Windigo as Xavier believes, the connections between his behaviour and his upbringing are implicit. When Xavier tells Elijah that he has gone mad, Elijah astutely states that “[w]hat’s mad is putting us in trenches to begin with. The madness it to tell us to kill and to award those of us who do it well” (350). Rather than indicating madness, Elijah’s behaviour shows that he is a product of the colonial environment and mirrors the destructive characteristics of the situations which have shaped his life. Due to the circumstances of his upbringing and the situations in which he finds himself during the war, it is unsurprising that Elijah succumbs to morphine addiction and relies on it to sustain him and make him a better hunter. As the character in the novel who succumbs to addiction early on and never recovers, Boyden’s characterization supports the notion that an eroded cultural identity is a leading cause of substance abuse issues amongst Aboriginals, and Elijah’s lack of a solid cultural foundation, which prohibits his recovery, speaks to what Boyden sees as imperative for healing and continued survival.

Because of Elijah’s separation from community his perspective in the novel is not representative of a traditional Cree worldview as we see expressed in Xavier’s narrations. For the most part, the novel is presented from Xavier’s perspective, but the parts that are indicative of Elijah’s perspective offer a counterpoint to Xavier. The way that he views the world, his identity and other Aboriginal people embodies the cultural, and by extension individual, traumas inflicted on First Nations communities by colonial forces. As such he demonstrates how a lack of cultural knowledge and connection to community can lead to a fractured identity and how drug abuse can



be a form of escapism and potentially a way to connect with traditional ways of seeing. Like Gabriel, Elijah's implicit exclusion from his community and his inability to escape Western ideological paradigms makes it impossible for him to survive. Though their exclusions are predicated on different grounds, the way Boyden constructs Elijah's identity also highlights a sickness within the Aboriginal community. This sickness is not one of misogynistic world views, but still speaks to how members of the Aboriginal community have failed "to break free of an unhealthy non-Native ideological framework" (*Magic Weapons* 166). As discussed above, Elijah locates his identity inside of a framework of Western stereotypical beliefs about Aboriginal people and so can never reconnect with his community. As a stand-in for other members of Aboriginal society, specifically those who spent the majority of their lives in residential schools<sup>5</sup> without a family to support them, Elijah represents the seeming impossibility these individuals face in trying to recreate an authentic Aboriginal identity and worldview after years of Western ideological indoctrination. Without a reconnection, or in Elijah's case an initial connection, to an Aboriginal perspective, he is unable to rely on his community and develop a sense of identity to help him recover from past traumas. In this sense, Elijah embodies J.R. Miller's statement that "Indians who had been in the schools were often worse off than those who had not... [a]nd after they left the schools, they failed to become successful and self-sufficient" (136). Elijah struggles to be accepted by his Euro-Canadian peers during the war and at the same time to become a productive member of his Aboriginal community, though his experiences at residential school preclude him from ever fully integrating back into his traditional culture.

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<sup>5</sup> "Increasingly [in the twentieth-century], the Department of Indian Affairs used the residential schools as a refuge for orphaned or neglected children" though there had "always been an emphasis on using the schools to provide for orphans" (Miller 313). For more information on residential schools in Canada see *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* by J.R. Miller.

As stated above, readers are often given Xavier's perspective on Elijah, though it may be rash to accept Xavier's claim that Elijah has gone Windigo because Elijah actually embodies several characteristics of Weesageechak, a traditional figure in Cree mythology. Indeed, his last name, Whiskeyjack, is a bastardization by Euro-Canadians of the Cree Weesageechak, further highlighting the negative effects colonial contact has had on the development of his identity. This figure does not adhere to Western distinctions between good and evil, but embodies characteristics which on some levels can equate him with the insatiable Windigo and on others with the benevolent, humourous "elder brother" figure of myth. The story "Weesahkwechahk and the birds, and why the trees have scabs" (Ellis 309-313) and the stories that follow it speak to Weesageechak's capacity for cruelty, gluttony and a desire for revenge. First he tricks a large quantity of birds into dancing for him with their eyes closed and then tells them to "Dance with your necks together" (309) before lassoing and killing them all. Another story tells of how he eats birds until he cannot fit another bite in his body and requests that the trees squeeze him to expel excrement so he can eat more. When the trees won't let him go at his command, he punishes them upon regaining his freedom. Alongside Weesageechak's capacity for humour, transformation, and fun, there exists what Womack describes as "more oppressive characteristics of this figure" (qtd. in "What's the Trouble" 10). In light of this darker side to the trickster figure, it is not impossible to imagine that Elijah does not go Windigo, but consistently embodies the many characteristics of the Weesageechak figure for which he is named.

Different examples of Elijah's capacity for good and evil are found throughout the novel, even once he has apparently become a Windigo. From the moment he enters the Canadian army, Elijah is accepted by his peers: "Elijah can out-talk even the officers with his nun's English and

his quick thinking. The others in our section are drawn to him and his endless stories” (65). This talent is similar to Weesageechak’s capacity for story-telling and his ability to draw others to him, whether the outcome is good or bad. Once in the army he continues to flash “the same trickster grin he’s flashed since childhood” (107) which indicates that his lifelong connection to this figure. The jokes he plays on Xavier, such as getting him to spell the word “fart” at residential school and telling him that the meat he is eating “is human. German to be exact” (310), are always situated within the context of Weesageechak as there is the “gleam of the trickster is in his eyes” (310). The dark humour associated with Elijah, and by extension Weesageechak, fits in with Cree tales about this figure, who at times is benevolent and at others participates in dark deeds such as rape and vengeance. Elijah’s capacity for goodness is also demonstrated as he helps Gilberto write a letter home to his wife in which he describes Gilberto in such a way so that his wife “will see you [Gilberto] as the hero you are” (151). As Xavier looks on he sees an “innocence in Elijah’s eyes, that desire to help somebody else with his words” (151), which demonstrates that though Elijah may kill his enemies and even enjoy it, there is goodness within him which he wants to share with others so that he can use what he has learned in a positive way.

Though it appears that Elijah attempts to reject his heritage by speaking in an English accent, eschewing his Native religion, and using the sweat lodge to keep officers away, instead this behaviour can be interpreted as Elijah relying on his understanding of Euro-Canadian culture to protect himself. Xavier states that he “know[s] his friend well enough to be sure that he constructed this tent not so much to seek visions as to protect himself from the prying eyes of the officers. It would be easy for him to claim he is conducting mysterious Indian ceremonies in the

tent. This would be enough to keep most of them away” (121). Elijah relies on the racist assumptions of his European and Canadian peers to keep them out of his business. He understands how to avoid punishment because he has been raised in an environment which propagates this racism. Elijah’s understanding of Euro-Canadian culture is illustrated at a young age when he and Xavier attend residential school together. He shows Xavier “four letters squiggled on the paper,” and when Xavier asks him what they mean, his “eyes brightened, and a smile stretched across his face. ‘It is what comes out of Sister Magdalene’s bum,’ he giggled” (152). He knows that this behaviour is against the rules, as evidenced by his giggling, and indeed, as soon as Sister Magdalene sees the paper the boys are beaten as she tries to “strike the heathen from thee” (153). Though he initially cries out in “mock pain,” eventually the beating “began to truly hurt him” and “his cries became real” (153). If this situation is just one example of the abuse and racism encountered at the residential school, it is unsurprising that Elijah has appropriated the language and knowledge he acquired there in an attempt to protect himself. Another scene which illustrates Elijah’s recognition of the ability those in power have to make him suffer is after the taking of Candy Trench when Lieutenant Breech refuses to believe Elijah made as many kills as he claims. He asks him: “How many canoe lengths did you say they were from you?... I’ll make sure to put it in my report,” and then “stares at Elijah, his smile daring him to respond” (196). In response to this goading Elijah merely “smiles back” and replies “Very good, sir. Very good joke!” (196). By using his mastery of the English language and knowledge of Euro-Canadian culture, Elijah is able to survive and even thrive amongst his peers for a while during the war.

A major reason Elijah tries to stay on the good side of the Lieutenant and those above him is so that he can return home a hero and become a chief. His desire to fit into both worlds is paradoxical, but unsurprising considering that he has been raised both in a residential school and in the bush with Niska and Xavier. In fact, Elijah seems to inhabit what Neta Gordon calls an assigned identity. Elijah's "Cree name is Weesageechak. But that is something he doesn't share with the *wemistikoshiw*. Whiskeyjack is how they say his name, make it their own. He has told me [Xavier] that what they do to his name is what sounds to my ears like a longer word for *bastard*, making his name a name without family" (154). The name assigned to Elijah, Whiskeyjack, "is a mispronunciation of his Cree name Weesageechak" (Gordon 127) and due to this mispronunciation he "begins to inhabit an assigned identity" (127). This mispronunciation indicates a fracture between Elijah and his Aboriginal heritage caused by his removal from that community at a very young age. The association of the *wemistikoshiw* pronunciation of his name with the word *bastard* indicates that Elijah inhabits a liminal space between Cree and Euro-Canadian cultures, essentially an orphan in each. Gordon claims that Elijah's "imposed identity... operates as a version of the non-Aboriginal who superficially exploits Aboriginal myth to his own cultural ends," and that throughout the war Elijah "increasingly revels in the idea... that it is his 'Indianness' that gives him 'the charm' for military activity (73)" (128). It is unsurprising that Elijah believes and even revels in these ideas because he was raised in an environment that propagates racial stereotyping, and so has been conditioned to believe these statements constitute authentic Indigeneity. If these stereotypes constitute his definition of Aboriginality, it again makes sense that he would take pleasure in the belief that it is his "Indianness" that makes him so talented, as this type of double-edged commendation connects him to his concept of Aboriginal

identity and as such includes him in the Aboriginal community. However, due to Elijah's outsider status in both Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian contexts, he is never fully accepted by either community. Ultimately, his disconnect from his Cree culture prevents him from recovering from his addiction and the acts he committed because he does not have the support of his community nor the cultural knowledge necessary to develop an authentic Aboriginal identity that does not rely on cultural stereotypes. Arguably, the main reason he is accepted in the army is because of his ability to kill so well, which he then thinks to leverage into a position as Chief of his band upon his return, providing him with what he considers the ultimate acceptance by his community.

Elijah's constant quest for honour and glory is a direct result of his lack of recognition in and connection to his own culture. Throughout the novel, he is constantly trying to be the best at what he does, whether in the bush or on the battlefield. This desire most likely stems from the insecurity of being raised in a residential school where Xavier tells him that he was "taught nothing useful" (107). As they are hunting Elijah "follow[s] noisily, snapping twigs and breathing heavily" (107) until he speaks and scares the fox away. He spends the rest of that night walking around their *askihkan* trying not to step on twigs and when Xavier wakes in the morning tells him "I will try not to make any more mistakes, Xavier" (108). Though he is unaware of how to live in the bush when he leaves the residential school, Elijah is determined to catch up to Xavier's abilities and prove that he is worthy of his Cree heritage. The war, then, offers a new arena in which Elijah can prove his worthiness and because of the skills he acquired at residential school he has a chance to become better recognized than Xavier. This desire to prove himself is established as the boys are leaving to go to war: "all he [Elijah] wants is that place" because the "war will make him into something" (102). Though Elijah is homesick, he sees the war as a

means to an end: “Elijah is able to banish this sadness by talking about his triumphant return there [to the bush]. ‘I will go back and become chief,’ he says to me. ‘I will become a great chief of the people and I will grow into old age pining for these days’” (332). Over the course of the war he receives two medals (254, 325-6) for his bravery during battle and a promotion to corporal after Thompson is injured. Though Xavier claims that “Elijah has learned to take pleasure in killing” (283), what he has more likely learned to take pleasure in is the recognition these killings afford him. While at home in the bush, if Xavier is to be believed, Elijah was always second to him and had to work harder to fit into and survive bush life, but now that he is in a place where not only his skills as a hunter are rewarded but also his grasp of language and culture, he can receive the recognition he so greatly desires in order to authenticate his identity. However, Elijah’s reliance on recognition based on Western paradigms of bravery and heroism, as opposed to working for recognition within his own community, speaks to his embodiment of a disconnect between culture and individual.

It is Elijah’s skills as a hunter of men which lead to his recognition in the army; however, the act of scalping his victims which Xavier interprets as his having gone too far is initially suggested by several Frenchmen they meet in a tavern. These men suggest that Elijah do what Europeans “taught your people a long time ago” (204) and begin collecting the scalps of his victims as evidence of his kills, “[t]ak[ing] a bit of [them] to feed you” (204). The allusion to feeding on human victims and the connection between Europeans and the act of scalping indicates that it is the Europeans and their culture which embodies the savagery and cannibalism of the Windigo. This connection is explicitly stated a couple of pages later when Xavier says that he “thinks they [the Frenchmen] are *windigos*” (207). The Frenchmen tell Elijah that

participating in this ritual “will buy you honour among us... and we are honourable men” (204).

In light of Elijah’s need for recognition, which stems from a lack of cultural acceptance and, therefore, a lack of identity, the scalping of his victims can be interpreted not as a sign of his going Windigo, but as a sign of his increasing need for the honour that killing Germans has afforded him. In behaving this way he is trying to become an honourable individual whose word will not be questioned because of his race.

In light of Elijah’s feelings of inferiority due to the racism and abuse he experienced at residential school, it comes as little surprise that he turns to morphine as a form of escapism. When Elijah initially tries morphine, the first thing that happens to him is that his “head floats from the pain of his body, hovers there” (126). The disconnect between his head and the pain he feels speaks to the morphine’s capacity as an escape from reality. His desire to erase his residential school experiences from his life is indicated when he tells Thompson that sniping is “hunting, and hunting is what we have done all our lives” (96), despite the fact that he only lived in the bush for the later years of his life. When Elijah’s desire to forget his residential school experiences is taken in conjunction with the morphine’s ability to disconnect him from his physical pain it seems that he relies on the drug as an escape from the psychological pain caused by the abuses he experienced at residential school. Boyden juxtaposes a scene in which Xavier is recounting his time at residential school and the punishment he and Elijah received for spelling naughty words with the statement that “Elijah is pulled away from this moment by the strong tide of wanting to try the morphine again. I know now that is it more than medicine. Much more” (153). This juxtaposition further indicates a connection between the physical, psychological and sexual abuse Elijah experienced at residential school and his desire to try the



morphine. Though Elijah is not the one who makes the connection, as Xavier narrates this entire scene, Boyden's juxtaposition of these two moments shows that though there are other reasons Elijah uses morphine, at the heart of his addiction lies a struggle with identity and isolation.

In addition to Elijah's reliance on morphine as an escape from trauma of his past he also uses because he thinks the drug helps him become a better hunter. He seems to believe that the morphine makes him into a better version of himself, as evidenced by claims that when he takes it "[h]is hearing sharpens" and that he needs it in order to be the best sniper. As stated above, this desire stems from a lack of connection to any community and a desire to prove himself and develop a specific identity as a hunter. His hope of leveraging his performance in the war into a position as chief upon his return home speaks to another reason he continues to use morphine:

But when the golden liquid is in his veins! Even at night the world is bathed in a soft light. He hears men talking and he understands what they are truly saying beneath their words. He can make himself float from his body at will and look down on the world below him—the world that man has created—and still see the beauty in it. He becomes the hunter at these times, the invincible hunter who can lie still for hours, for days, only moving to refuel his body with the medicine, using his osprey's vision to spot the enemy. (212)

This quotation demonstrates that the morphine not only helps Elijah see the beauty in the world despite all the horrors he has seen and experienced, but it also helps him leave his body, as if on a vision, and become an invincible hunter, the type of hunter who would be welcomed back into his community as a hero and a chief, at least in his estimation.

Vikki Visvis claims that trauma in *Three Day Road* is reconfigured through different discursive identifications of the Windigo in the novel:

manifestations of trauma as catastrophe, mental wound, or cultural imperialism are reformulated as devouring Windigos and thus are culturally reconsidered in accordance with a distinctly First Nations cosmology. At other times this reconceptualization is achieved through discursive subversion: the discourse of savagery implicitly associated with the Windigo in Western constructions, and often relied upon to rationalize the cultural trauma of assimilation in Indigenous societies, is strategically inverted so that its links to violence and abjection are associated with white colonial culture in the form of the First World War and not exclusively Aboriginal primitivism. (225)

If we take Visvis's claim one step further, it becomes apparent that Elijah's association with the Windigo is symbolic of the cultural damages inflicted upon First Nations communities by colonial culture. By linking the Windigo to the First World War, residential schools and the abuses suffered therein, Boyden, in having Xavier allude to the fact that Elijah may have gone Windigo, indicates that this has been caused by his interactions with settler culture. In so doing, Boyden frames colonial culture as mad, savage and violent, and demonstrates how this madness has damaged Aboriginal communities and identities. In this sense, Elijah, like Gabriel, is representative of the large segment of Canada's First Nations population whom the government tried to assimilate into colonial culture and disconnect from their cultural heritage. As the character in *Three Day Road* who spends the most time in residential school, Elijah's connection to his cultural heritage comes at a much later age, creating his desire to prove himself not only

within the context of white colonial culture, but within his own culture as well. It is for this reason that he strives to be the best at killing, so he can return home and become chief of his tribe. After Xavier has become convinced of Elijah's insanity, Elijah says "'I'm not crazy'..." 'You must listen to me, X. This is war. This is not home. What's mad is them putting us in trenches to begin with. The madness is to tell us to kill and to award those who do it well. I only wish to survive'" (Boyden 350). At this moment Elijah hits on one of the main questions the novel raises: has Elijah truly gone mad? Or is his behaviour a product of his cultural context, a context which lines men up face to face and forces them to kill one another for a few metres of land? Essentially, Boyden raises questions about the nature of Elijah's identity and whether or not he does go Windigo, and the association between Elijah and this Cree figure is redirected onto colonial culture in such a way that questions which culture is actually "savage." Boyden draws connections between colonial domination and the madness of the First World War, and situates the war as "a traumatic event plus a colonial agency that, like the Windigo consumes, and, in this context, devours First Nations cultures and beliefs" (Visvis 234). This technique effectively supports the idea that Elijah is a stand-in for much of Canadian Aboriginal culture and so he, like Gabriel, must die so that Xavier can understand the effects of colonial history and ensure that his children will remember the violence inflicted upon their communities. In so doing he will better be able to keep their traditions alive so that Cree culture can survive into the future.

Another trauma that Elijah endures is the sexual abuse he received at the hands of Sister Magdalene at the residential school. This abuse, though not discussed in the novel in the same detail as the sexual abuse committed against Gabriel and Jeremiah in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, still indicates the damages wrought on his identity by specifically religious colonial forces. Elijah

tells Xavier how the nun “would rub her soapy hands over him, how Elijah would get an erection and how she would scold him and then take his erection in her hands and rub him until his taut penis thumped against his lower belly in a spasm” (341). Elijah has no control over this experience, nor over the response of his body to the nun’s touch. The first time he ejaculated from her touch “[h]e was horrified. He thought he was broken” and the nun “began screaming at Elijah until he was afraid she’d gone mad and might try to drown him” (341). His lack of control during these encounters parallels the victimization of many First Nations children during their residential school experiences and the nun’s reaction implicitly tells Elijah that the abuse and his physical reaction are his own fault, as opposed to hers. However, as we have seen Elijah appropriate the English language and knowledge of Euro-Canadian culture to his own ends, he, like Gabriel, also attempts to reconfigure his sexual trauma on his own terms. While the company is stationed in Albert during a break from the trenches, Elijah goes to the city centre and climbs onto the statue of the Virgin Mary, who “leans at such an angle that we wonder how she’s not tumbled to the ground” (178). As he straddles her and continues to climb, he “makes the decision that he will reach her golden crown,” and though she “shakes with the effort of holding him as he slides out further onto her,” he becomes “hard with the excitement of this. He has his first erection in months” (198). He continues to slide up her back while “shaking now as much as she is,” and finally as he reaches her crown he “begins to convulse in waves, the virgin below vibrating with him” (198). The entire scene is reminiscent of a sexual encounter, but instead of the nun or religious authority being in charge of the situation, Elijah makes the conscious decision to straddle the statue of Mary and climb up her back, an action which leads to his sexual release. He metaphorically takes a sexualized aspect of his identity out of the hands of

the nun and regains control over the abuse he suffered at residential school. Rather than letting that abuse define him he makes a conscious effort, even though he is drunk on wine and high on morphine, to rewrite that part of his history so that the abuse will not define him.

Both Gabriel and Elijah are unable to survive the abuses they experienced at residential school due to their separation from, or rejection by, their communities. They act out these abuses on themselves and are unable to fully reconcile their Aboriginal identities with the traumas and experiences that shaped their childhoods. Though both characters attempt to counteract their negative experiences, the way they do so inflicts more damage on their psyches and bodies and they are unable to heal until they enter the spiritual realm in the afterlife. Their deaths illuminate ongoing problems within the Aboriginal community which need to be acknowledged and repaired before healing can take place on an individual level. In presenting the experiences of these two characters, both Boyden and Highway are representing another Aboriginal perspective of reality, one which has been damaged by sexual abuse, institutionalized racism, community and familial isolation, and an attempted separation or eradication of traditional Cree spiritual beliefs.

#### Chapter Four: Narrative Technique and the Creation of Aboriginal Realism

As we have seen in the previous three chapters, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *Three Day Road* offer a rich ground for a discussion of concepts of Aboriginal identity and the authenticity of Aboriginal experience and how the reality created relates to the characters' capacity for healing. Whereas the last two chapters were concerned with issues of how the individual characters in the novels interpret and define reality based on their experiences and cultural backgrounds, this chapter will focus on the different narrative techniques and constructions used by Highway and Boyden. Specifically, this chapter will interrogate different ways of writing, seeing, and interpreting and how these differences influence the content, structure, and possibly the overall purpose of the novels. It is not difficult to see how the writing styles of these two authors diverge. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is written from a third person, semi-omniscient perspective and utilizes figurative language to create a dream-like prose style combined with various realistic elements. On the other hand, *Three Day Road* is written in the first person (though the specific individual lens varies depending on chapter) in a realistic, empirical manner which is based on observation or experience rather than theory or interpretation. Interestingly, this empiricism is based on the observations and experiences of Xavier, the Cree character who has lived most of his life in the Ontario bush; so, although the writing style is akin to realism, the experiences and Xavier's interpretations of them are from his distinctly Cree perspective. This chapter will investigate the effects of these different writing styles in relation to Aboriginal experience, authenticity, and ultimately ways of seeing or creating a specifically Aboriginal realism. In particular, I will demonstrate that Highway's writing style embodies the creative adaptability of Indigenous traditions to the contemporary cultural moment that his characters use

to create active and evolving Aboriginal identities. Conversely, Boyden's novel supports a strictly Cree traditional approach to Indigeneity and his writing reflects a more traditionally Western realist style. However, though his style is reflective of a more traditionally Western approach, he writes about Indigenous practices and traditions in the same realist language which prevents the privileging of one culture over the other.

In order to understand how Boyden's and Highway's writing styles diverge from strict European realism, a brief outline of some of the key components of realism is necessary. J.A. Cuddon defines realism as fundamentally "the portrayal of life with fidelity. It is thus not concerned with idealization, with rendering things beautiful when they are not, or in any way presenting them in any guise as they are not; nor, as a rule, is realism concerned with presenting the supranormal or transcendental" ("Realism" 720). Realism also suggests a verisimilitude or "in some way possesses that kind of authenticity which is generally believed to be an essential quality in a work of literature" (721). The basic foundation of realism, though it went through many different stages and iterations, relies on "the aesthetic value of representing everyday urban sights-- places, people, and fashions-- in all their triviality and ephemerality" (Baudelaire qtd. in Bowlby xiii). Indeed, Rachel Bowlby argues that "Realism was in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth century, bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded, or out of bounds" (xiii). This concept supports the idea that "the writer should represent ordinary folk not grand ones, and not idealize but show them neither better, nor worse than they really are: thus an extension of the range of *milieux* and characters available for representation is associated with an equivalent extension of truth-telling" (xiv). By focusing on ordinary people and extending the range of what

was appropriate or acceptable to write about, realist authors were attempting to get at the “true” nature of society and humanity, or at least to represent certain iterations of the real. Finally, the definition of realism was extended by the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet in his mid-1950s manifesto for the *nouveau roman* where he argues “that all new art forms present themselves in opposition to previously or currently dominant ones, [and] that all new literature is in fact a new form of realism, a new way of imagining reality” (xv) because “the world itself does not remain the same, so... the tools for telling it need to change with it” and “because new realisms themselves create new ways of seeing reality” (xvi). These descriptions of realism encompass a need for representation of previously ignored or marginalized figures in a normal day-to-day setting. Taken in conjunction with Robbe-Grillet’s claim that the tools of representation must change along with the world, Boyden’s and Highway’s incorporations of realist modes of writing in their novels illustrate a desire for representations of a different reality. As opposed to the new characters being portrayed being lower-class, white Europeans, these authors choose to depict an Aboriginal community which was historically marginalized, appropriated or silenced in Canadian/North American fiction until recent decades. However, because these characters have different ways of seeing and interpreting the world around them, the form of realism these authors create is markedly different from European realism in that the ordinary day-to-day life depicted in the novels encompasses a Cree spiritual realm interacting with Canadian culture.

Obviously, realism is not synonymous with reality or the real, but is merely one way of representing a specific author’s or character’s interpretation and construction of reality based on experience. Though traditional realism arguably represents a totalizing and hegemonic portrayal or attempted mimicry of reality by claiming that it is a faithful reconstruction of the world, both



Highway and Boyden rely on aspects of realism, specifically their novels' locations in a realistic fictional world to present an Aboriginal perspective on culture, one which mimics as it deconstructs a rational Western representation of reality. What constitutes reality in the novels is directly related to how the different characters have been raised and how their perceptions of reality have been shaped by outside forces. For instance, in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, North Main Street, where Jeremiah sees many Aboriginals in the novel spend their time intoxicated, represents a real, living, breathing hell to Jeremiah due to the image of the chart of Heaven and Hell he was taught in residential school:

Strands of country music-- Tinny, tawdry, emaciated-- oozed through the cracks under filthy doorways. The doors opened and closed, opened and closed. From their dark maws stumbled men and women, all dark of skin, of hair, of eye, like Jeremiah, all drunk senseless, unlike Jeremiah. Had the music student not looked upon this scene somewhere before? On a great chart with tunnels and caves and forbidden pleasures? He leaned forward to see if he could catch a glimpse, beyond the swinging doors, of horned creatures with three-pronged forks, laughing as they pitched Indian after Indian into the flames. (105)

This part of town is not only representative of Hell, but also of Jeremiah's reality. Through this description and others, readers learn that he resents the Aboriginals he sees on North Main because of how his reality has been shaped by residential school, and so he tries to reject them and his own Aboriginal identity. We still see a reflection of reality, i.e. that Highway sees an endemic of alcoholism and drug abuse amongst Aboriginals, but rather than representing this endemic as one of many negative effects of colonial contact and residential school abuse, it is

reconfigured through Jeremiah's eyes as a product of the inherent sinfulness of his community, a point of view directly correlated to his experiences at residential school.

Where Jeremiah comes to view a specific location as representative of the supposed inherent savageness of his people, Xavier sees his world as populated with Windigos due to how his aunt Niska taught him to perceive the world. As mentioned earlier, the Windigo is brought into the novel early through Niska's recounting of Micah and his family. Shortly after she relates this tale to Xavier, the first of several parallels is drawn between the madness and insatiability of war and the Windigo. While hiding in a trench after being caught in no man's land during a raiding party, Xavier describes the craters, the destruction, and the multitudes of the dead around him. He says it seems "the war has moved to another place. It has sucked the life from St. Eloi and left it like this, has moved on in search of more bodies to try and fill its impossible hunger" (Boyden 73). The insatiable appetite associated with the Windigo in many traditional narratives of the James Bay and Rock Cree is in this instance applied to the killing machine that is the First World War. Throughout the novel men are sent over the trenches to certain death by other men far behind the front lines, indicating an iteration of cannibalism that is not based on the literal consumption of human flesh by another human being, but on the sacrifice of and complete disregard for life which characterized the war. Considering the first person narrative technique which is utilized throughout the novel, it is apt that Xavier is the one who describes the war in such a way. As someone who comes from a family of Windigo killers, he knows "*windigos* are real" (Boyden 359), and so it is his family history and his cultural upbringing which lead to this specific interpretation of war. Rather than simply depicting the war as a killing machine, Boyden draws parallels between it and Xavier's life in the bush, and so reconfigures

the war for his audience in a way with which they may not have been familiar before. By describing the war in this way, Boyden is participating in discursive subversion in that “the discourse of savagery implicitly associated with the Windigo in Western constructions, and often relied upon to rationalize the cultural trauma of assimilation in Indigenous societies, is strategically inverted so that its links to violence and abjection are associated with white colonial culture” (Visvis 225). In doing so he introduces to his readers a Cree way of seeing the world that incorporates the marginalized Indigenous soldiers, and demonstrates the inherent flaws in Western rationalization for the cultural assimilation of Canada’s Indigenous population.

The blending of Cree spirituality and culture with realistic representations of Canadian society which characterizes the form of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* serves to reinforce the many different cultures, geographical spaces, and religions that blend together in the world of the novel. By resisting the boundaries of Western realism, this novel destabilizes the idea that contemporary Canada is fixed and unchangeable, creating the possibility of a new, inclusive, and culturally sensitive society. According to Sarah Wylie Krotz, the novel demonstrates “the creative potential of the contact zone by drawing energy from the interpenetration of Aboriginal and European forms and traditions” (199), while not glossing over the “clashes and fragmentations that define postcolonial space” (198). This creative potential is found in the form of the novel, whose blending of traditional Cree mythology with the European construct of the novel (specifically the realist form) illustrates the adaptive potential of Cree culture within colonial systems. As such, Highway’s novel functions as a cultural object which indicates the ongoing presence of an authentic Aboriginal experience that takes European traditions and makes them meaningful in an Indigenous context. Not only does the novel deal with historical events

from a distinctly Indigenous perspective, it presents in its form as an adaptive cultural object a potential way for readers to interrogate and understand their own experiences.

Highway's novel illustrates what Geoff Hancock calls a "collision between cultures" (33) because the "juxtaposition of realism and fantasy, or mythos and logos... which characterizes magic realist fiction, mirrors the superimposition of European culture on the North and South American landscape" (34). Though I am arguing that Highway's specific style relies on spirituality as opposed to magic to create a depiction of an Aboriginal reality, it still represents a collision of cultures in its form and content. From the beginning, the novel is situated in specific times and locations, such as the "northern Manitoba February" (Highway 3) in which the initial event of Abraham's dogsled race takes place. Over the course of the novel the action moves from one specific location to another: from Mistik Lake to the Birch Lake Indian Residential School; to Winnipeg and to Toronto. Though the names of certain locations are fictional, the areas they represent are real and as such these specific locations serve to ground the text in a recognizable and verifiable cultural context. The first event of the novel, "The World Championship Dog Derby" (Highway 5), is grounded in both the specific spatial location of Oopaskooyak, Manitoba, and also a temporal location: "February 23-25, 1951" (Highway 5). This empirically verifiable data serves to reinforce European realism's "attempts to create an accurate picture of the world as it is experienced by normal human consciousness" as the "quantity of sensory data [enhances] the reader's confidence that this representation is accurate" (Faris 44). Throughout the novel, there are many descriptions of locations which rely on sensory experiences such as sight, smell, and sound:

The smells all mingled into one: of carbon monoxide, seventeen intensities of perfume, aftershave, cologne, breath of steak, chicken liver, onions, garlic, teeth gone bad, minty mouthwash, unkempt clumps of armpit hair overhead. Too much human living in one constricted space. (104)

However, the juxtaposition between data which can be verified through the senses and “reports of phenomena that are not real and verifiable” (Faris 44) takes place within the first chapter of the novel, setting up the reader’s expectations that this realistic narrative world will also contain elements which European rationalism cannot explain, and effectively blurring the boundary between Western empiricism and Cree mythology. The novel offers a Cree perspective from which to interpret reality, rather than interpreting these elements as existing outside of reality,. The blurring of boundaries indicates that there exist alternative ways of interpreting the same events that are influenced by cultural heritage but which do not make these events any less real.

After winning the Dog Derby, Abraham receives his trophy from the winner of the Fur Queen Beauty Pageant. Though the description of the arena where the pageant is held and the events which take place within it is quite realistic, it still contains elements that cannot be rationally explained. After the Fur Queen is crowned, “the crowd roared until the very ceiling of the building threatened to rise up and float off towards the planet Venus” (Highway 9), an event which the narrator presents as a logical response to such a roar. However, the scene in which Abraham receives the trophy illustrates the combination of realism and the mythological within the novel. The narrator relates the scene to the readers as follows:

The next thing Abraham knew, or so he would relate to his two youngest sons years later, the goddess floated up to a sky fast fading from pink-and-purple dusk

to the great blackness of night, then became one with the northern sky.... And when she extended one hand down towards the hunter on Earth, a silver wand appeared in it, simple as magic. Now a fairy-tale godmother glimmering in the vastness of the universe, the Fur Queen waved the wand. (12)

Though the magical elements within this scene can be problematized because all Abraham can “see [are] bits and pieces of the scene before him” (10), the narrator states that “he [Abraham] became aware—he must have been dreaming” (10). Therefore, since dreaming is “a modality of learning that possesses, for traditional Cree, a validity sometimes exceeding the data of conventional waking perception” (Brightman 6), Highway presents this scene as a dream which Abraham can then interpret and apply to his own life. The Fur Queen’s presence is pervasive throughout the novel and this scene depicts her initial entry into the Okimasis’s lives as both a literal Fur Queen and Abraham’s vision of her. Because of the combination of dream vision and realism, readers are encouraged to consider the seemingly irreducible elements of the narrative to be merely another aspect of, and way to, interpret reality.

The form of Highway’s novel serves as a vehicle to effectively insert Cree perspectives of the residential school experience, and its ongoing effects, into Canadian public discourse. Critics such as Sam McKegney have drawn parallels between Jeremiah’s and Highway’s developments as artists who through creative negotiation with colonial history and Cree spirituality, attempt to “stimulate a thirst for knowledge (Indigenous and otherwise) among Indigenous youth” (102). Both Highway and Jeremiah succeed in adapting these mythologies in order to make them relevant and palatable to contemporary audiences. The novel is “Highway’s first time writing, albeit through the filter of fiction, about the sexual abuse he suffered in school, abuse of which,

for many years, he was unable to speak” (Fagan 215). Through this fictional account, Highway creates a space in which to discuss the sexual abuse he, and many other Aboriginal children, suffered, and also the abuse of Cree culture by colonial systems. The space he constructs helps him, and the characters of the novel, to creatively demonstrate the systematic oppression of their culture by colonial institutions. Highway mainly deals with the residential school institution, which “acted as a weapon in a calculated attack on Indigenous cultures, seeking through such now infamous procedures as familial separation, forced speaking of non-Native languages, and propagandist derogation of pre-contact modes of existence and Native spiritual systems to compel its inmates into assimilation” (McKegney 79-80). By incorporating Cree spiritual systems into the narrative, Highway appropriates the genre of the realist novel in order to insert the voices of the marginalized Cree community into Canada’s historical record.

Throughout the novel, Highway draws attention to the damages wrought on the Aboriginal community by associating sexual abusers with the Weetigo, a cannibalistic creature in Cree mythology or even more appropriately, “a monster who eats little boys” (Highway 271). At the Birch Lake Indian Residential School, Jeremiah witnesses Father LaFleur molesting his younger brother, Gabriel, late at night. That this event takes place at night adds to the dream-like quality of the encounter and creates a distance between the reader and the event. However, the reader is already accustomed to the inclusion of Cree cultural elements in the novel and is therefore shocked by the reality of sexual abuse being described:

But Gabriel was not alone. A dark, hulking figure hovered over him like a crow. Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honey-comb, or the Weetigo feasting on human flesh.

As he stood half-asleep, he thought he could here the smacking of lips,  
mastication....

The bedspread was pulsating, rippling from the centre. No, Jeremiah wailed  
to himself, *please*. Not him again. (79)

Highway blends spiritual figures, specifically the Weetigo, with the realistic events which took place at residential schools across the country. In doing so, he offers a Cree interpretation of the event, instead of the direct, empirical perspective of Western culture. The blending of empirically verifiable events with Cree cultural figures embodies the concept of Aboriginal realism due to its reliance on a culturally specific lens through which Highway (and therefore Jeremiah) depicts and interprets historical atrocities such as the rampant sexual abuse which occurred at residential schools across Canada<sup>6</sup>. This association between Western empirically based reality and Cree narrative destabilizes a specifically Euro-Canadian realism and its totalizing representations of reality, history, and the individual, and reflects the presence of an alternate belief system through which individuals can interpret history and reality.

Another example of the combination of Western and Cree genres lies in the six sections of Highway's novel titled with different classical musical directions. Each relates to the content found within them and indicates the importance Highway places on music and art as productive means of cultural adaptation and regeneration. Both brothers rely on their training in Western forms of artistic expression, piano and dance, to explore and create new interpretations of Cree spirituality and culture which builds upon the artistic talents they had before attending the school. Highway's choice to title each section of his novel with musical directions echoes the

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<sup>6</sup> A "1989 study sponsored by the Native Women's association of the Northwest Territories found that eight out of ten girls under the age of eight were victims of sexual abuse, and fifty percent of the boys of the same age had been sexually molested" (McKegney 111).



brothers' blending of these two different genres with Cree modes of expression to carve out a place for Cree culture in contemporary Canada. Though all parts have musical directions relating to their content, it is in the sixth section that the brothers begin to creatively adapt their individual artistic talents to the creation of an authentically Cree artistic expression. Notably, this section is entitled "presto con fuoco," the musical definition of which is very fast with fire or impetuosity. The section designations relate not only to the content of those parts, they also indicate the importance of music in particular and art in general to Highway's method of cultural adaptation and regeneration. The importance of music and dancing in the Cree community of Eemanapiteepitat is established early in the novel. When Abraham returns home triumphant from the World Championship Dog Derby in 1951, his cousin shoves his "battered old accordion" (Highway 16) into his hands and demands Abraham play his "dead wife's favourite jig... 'Kimoosoom Chimasoo'" (17). This song comes up many times in the novel, specifically when the characters are actively resisting colonial domination or cultural oppression. It appears that the entire community takes part in the initial dancing celebration. The celebration continues despite the fact that most of the community is Catholic and that the reservation's priest, Father Bouchard, has told them that "No good Catholic danced on Sundays" (17). Much like Jeremiah and Gabriel combine different art forms in order to productively create Aboriginal identities which interact with and are informed by their contact with Euro-Canadian culture, Highway blends European musical styles with Cree spirituality and storytelling to find a place for his culture and heritage within his contemporary cultural context.

McKegney argues that the characters know very little about their cultural heritage until "they begin in adulthood to actively incorporate Cree spirituality in their art" and that the "semi-

omniscient narrator performs the role of spiritual translator for the majority of the text” (*Magic Weapons* 154). However, though the boys may have been disconnected from their culture at a young age, their telling of traditional stories at relevant times indicates an understanding of and connection to their culture. In Winnipeg the narrator describes the shopping mall they have just departed as a Weetigo: “Grey and soulless, the mall loomed behind them, the rear end of a beast that, having gorged itself, expels its detritus” (Highway 121). The boys’ recounting of the tale of Weesageechak destroying the Weetigo by eating him from the inside is relevant to this description of the mall, though their grasp on the meaning of the story is vague:

‘Why did Weesageechak kill the Weetigo?’ asked Gabriel as he washed down a gob of bleeding beef with a torrent of Orange Crush.

‘All I remember is that the Weetigo had to be killed because he ate people,’ replied Jeremiah through a triangle of pizza. ‘Weesageechak chewed the Weetigo’s entrails from the inside out.’

‘Yuck!’ feigned Gabriel, chomping into a wedge of Black Forest cake thick with cream.

They ate so much their bellies came near to bursting. They drank so much their bladders became pendulous. (120)

Despite McKegney’s claim that they have little knowledge of their cultural heritage, their telling of this story at this specific time indicates a recognition of the connection between their insatiable appetites, their experiences in the mall, and the characteristics of the Weetigo. Highway’s use of the semi-omniscient narrator at this time distances them from their understanding of the story’s relevance and indicates that though they may not fully understand

their cultural heritage, their behaviour is being interpreted from a distinctly Cree perspective. This interpretation is significant because it highlights the fracture between the boys and their culture which was implemented at a young age. However, the inclusion of these stories within the narrative indicates that the attempt at complete annihilation of Cree cultural perspectives on the world have not been effective because the boys retain some knowledge of their heritage.

The art forms which Jeremiah creates in the novel, and which Highway creates in writing the novel, reflect a new adaptive configuration of Indigenous identity after contact. This identity addresses the cultural abuses committed against Cree communities by colonial forces, but also moves beyond simply blaming colonialism for all the problems within their societies. Though the erosion of Jeremiah's identity is inarguably caused by his experiences at residential school, the tools he uses to re-create a new sense of authenticity and identity are learned at Birch Lake. Highway's depiction of his characters' adaptation of colonial modes of artistic expression represents a technique whereby other Indigenous individuals can create positive outcomes from negative experiences. By effectively demonstrating a creative manner in which Indigenous people can re-appropriate their cultural history and adapt it to modern cultural conditions through the generic boundary crossing which takes place in the novel, Highway's work models "a process that affords him the creative weaponry to defeat the Weetigos of his past" (McKegney 102). McKegney points out that *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

not only argues for the application of Cree spirituality and orature to contemporary engagements with the residential school legacy; it embodies this application in the texture of its narrative. It is an example of the spiritualization of contemporary

discourse in practice, providing a prototype for the process it explicitly champions.

(154)

This process can be applied to many different modes of creative expression, as evidenced in the novel through Jeremiah's and Gabriel's adaption of Cree mythology to Western dance and theatre. Because of this adaptive process, this novel is immensely hopeful for the creation and preservation of Indigenous heritage well into the future. By effectively appropriating traditional Western novelistic genres and incorporating elements of Cree spirituality, Highway creatively adapts these art forms to reflect a new configuration of Indigenous identity and artwork. In doing so he deconstructs the totalizing effects of Western realism's claim to accurately depict reality and offers different perspectives from which to interpret the world. Both character and author demonstrate ways that these two seemingly oppositional belief systems can positively coexist to create a more equitable and culturally sensitive postcolonial society.

While Highway distances his readers from explicit descriptions of Cree ceremonies, essentially by not including any, and lets the traditions and stories speak for themselves (with some spiritual interpretation provided by the narrator), Boyden's writing style is direct. Highway may leave out explicit descriptions in order to encourage readers to learn about Cree culture on their own, whereas Boyden may include these descriptions in order to familiarize his audience, which is not specifically Cree or Aboriginal, with the culture about which he is writing.

Throughout the novel he realistically describes specific cultural traditions such as the sweat lodge, the act of divining and, perhaps most importantly, the extermination of the Windigo.<sup>7</sup> In addition to realistically describing Cree ceremonies, Boyden also creates graphic representations

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<sup>7</sup> Highway and Boyden use different spellings to refer to the figure of the *wītikōw*. When referring to Boyden's work I use his designation of the Windigo and when referring to Highway's work I use his Weetigo.

of World War 1. Boyden's creation of a realistic narrative world that incorporates Cree culture and practices in the same writing style reflects a realist concern with empirical and sensory evidence. By representing the Windigo and other Cree spiritual elements which exist outside the realm of Western empiricism in this realistic language, he does not privilege one reality over the other. He shows the interactions between Cree culture and Euro-Canadian culture from a distinctly Cree perspective because of the narrators' distinct relationships with the world and their interpretations of it. By writing the novel in this way, though not for a strictly Indigenous audience, Boyden addresses the damaging reality of colonial contact on Indigenous cultures, but from a perspective which is not that of the colonial centre.

Unlike Boyden, who uses realist language to describe the cultural practices of the James Bay Cree to incorporate that culture into Western reality without privileging one over the other, Highway's writing style indicates a privileging of Cree spirituality and culture. Scenes which describe Canadian culture are often written in realist language and have negative connotations such as the evident isolation and racism Jeremiah and Gabriel encounter. After leaving residential school for Winnipeg, Jeremiah hopes to be free at last, but the reality of his situation is one of loneliness and racial marginalization because

there were no girls to talk to. At his school, there may have been a thousand, but they were all white; not one spoke Cree. The exultation of his newfound freedom began to wilt just as he spied an orange-and-silver bus lumbering up the street....  
Sitting bolt upright, staring straight ahead, Jeremiah tried to appear as though he was on his way somewhere... when in fact he had absolutely nowhere to go. All

that awaited him was a basement room on the north side of the city, with a bed, a dresser, and a moth-eaten piano. (Highway 102-03)

Jeremiah's loneliness, his lack of connection with the city around him, and his bare living space speak to his disconnect from his culture and how this isolated life negatively impacts his sense of identity. Conversely, descriptions of scenes that feature Cree spirituality or lifestyles often take on a dream-like or poetic quality and do not rely on strictly realist descriptions:

No one has ever been able to explain what entered Champion Okimasis. The earth may have been caving in beneath his feet, the stone exploding, the northern forest gone mad and marching off to war. The sun may as well have fallen from the sky, the early afternoon was so dark.

But Champion Okimasis walked. He calmly raised his right foot and then calmly raised his left, eight paces forward in one unbroken line, a thousand caribou swirling around him like rapids around rocks.

Champion bent down, took Gabriel's hand in his, and the pair glided off towards the shimmering grey rock, as in a gavotte...

Champion may have had Gabriel's back to hide behind, but Gabriel had nothing... Eventually the blur without end took on form, but what? Dancers? Spirits? Whirlpools of light and air and shadow? The shapes became one pulsing wave of movement, throbbing, summoning him, beckoning him on. 'Come with us Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel, Okimasis-masis-masis, come with us...'

Champion began to sing.... '*Ateek, ateeek! Astum, Astum!... Yoah, ho-ho!*' (45-6)

This long quotation incorporates several different elements which signify the importance Highway places on a connection to culture and community. Though the boys are surrounded by a herd of caribou, Champion is able to calmly lead his brother to safety, and while sitting on a rock out of harm's way Gabriel encounters a vision, which his childhood mind embraces. Champion then begins repeating his caribou-summoning song as a sort of protective chant. Despite the inherent danger of this scene, the reader never fears that the boys will come to harm as the calmness and positive energy emanating throughout lead to the conclusion that connection to community, in this case family, and reliance on your own brand of sacred energy, in this case Jeremiah's song, are imperative for survival in the most dangerous of situations.

Another way Highway privileges his Cree culture in the novel is through comparisons of Cree and English languages and the Catholic use of Latin. At Gabriel's baptism "The [Latin] words, meaningless to Cree ears, pierced the infant's fragile bones and stayed there" (37). The negative connotations of the word "pierced," associated with Latin and by extension western religion are contrasted with the playful, often joyous usages of Cree throughout the novel. While recounting the tale of Weetigo and Weasel at the mall Jeremiah draws attention to the chasm separating English and Cree when he states that "You could never get away with a story like that in English" (118), referring to the teachings of Father LeFleur that said "'Bumhole' is a mortal sin in English" and "said the same thing about 'shit'" (118-19). In effect, stories that contain this kind of language and the cultures that embrace them are considered sinful. Whereas English appears to be classified as a serious language that "sounded like the *putt-putt-putt* of Happy Doll Magipom's pathetic three-horsepower outboard motor" (52), Abraham demonstrates the playfulness and humour to be found in his impeccable Cree:

‘*Ho-ho!*’ Abraham sang out, ‘I’ll buy the church a piano and throw your tired old *organ* smack in the lake.’ Their father’s joke plummeted, for on matters sensual, sexual, and therefore fun, a chasm as unbridgeable as hell separates Cree from English, the brothers were sadly learning. (190)

Again, Highway draws attention to an inherent fun found within Cree language that is a positive opposition to English throughout the novel. Though the brothers will sometimes use English at home to talk about things they don’t want their parents to understand, their use of Cree in the city is indicative of a desire to stay connected to home and culture. Gabriel’s use of Cree upon his arrival in Winnipeg after two years of Jeremiah being so lonely “he regularly considered swallowing his current landlady’s entire stock of angina pills” and “had given up his native tongue to the roar of the traffic” (113) makes Jeremiah stop breathing. Jeremiah soon begins speaking in Cree again and laughs “light as a springtime killdeer. For two brown Indian boys—not one, but two—were dancing-skipping-floating down Broadway Avenue, tripping over each other’s Cree, getting up and laughing, tripping over each other’s Cree, getting up and laughing” (114). This scene demonstrates both the joy the brothers get out of using their language and how this connection to their home helps them survive in the Western world. Highway’s preference for his native culture, spirituality, language, and home is evident in the way he describes and characterizes them in opposition to Western equivalents. I have discussed Highway’s use of Cree spirituality in the novel above, and in Chapter Three I argued that Gabriel’s death and rejection of Catholicism on his death bed indicate that God and Catholicism have been outwitted by Weesageechak (Cunha 112). In light of this privileging, Highway shows



that a connection to one's cultural roots, though not in a strictly traditionalist sense, is imperative for the survival of the individual and community and the beliefs embodied therein.

While Highway's writing style varies throughout *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Boyden's writing is consistently realist though he describes many different lifestyles, situations, and locations. The language used in *Three Day Road* to describe the war creates vivid and visceral images of the atrocities Elijah, Xavier, and the other men face during their time overseas. Unlike Highway's descriptions of abuse which are often dream-like in quality, Boyden relies on first-person, experiential language. In doing so he draws explicit attention to the abject conditions Xavier experiences, and from which he tries to recover after returning home. In essence, these descriptions become part of his narrative memory and though they are written in a seemingly Western style, they include comparisons to things he has experienced during his life in the bush. The entire novel is rife with descriptions of men's heads exploding, craters full of water that is "more of a stew" as "rotted faces peek over at [the men]... [with] eye-sockets [that] are empty and... lips pulled back from their open mouths so that they look like they are screaming" (70), and the horrible stink of death that always looms over the battlefields. Despite the empirical language used which denotes Western modes of realism, several examples of similes Xavier uses to describe the war, which were quoted in Chapter Two, directly relate to his life in the bush with Niska and their inclusion indicates a traditional Cree perspective on the war. Because of the need to learn to navigate through mud which "is a part of Cree existence" (199) during spring and autumn, Elijah and Xavier don't complain like the others and avoid foot trouble thanks to the "tall moccasins [Xavier] made for [them] a long time ago back in Canada" (199). Boyden makes

it clear that the boys are able to adapt to life in the trenches better than their European or Euro-Canadian counterparts because of their specific Cree life experiences.

Boyden does not alter his empirical writing style when describing the cultural practices of Niska and Xavier and so does not privilege one mode of life over the other. Rather than Cree culture and traditions existing in a separate world, the language used incorporates Cree life into what the West deems reality, and in this case, history. Boyden describes Niska's father's act of divining as a step by step process which results in tangible results, the killing of a moose and the feeding of his people, despite the disbelief prevalent in Western culture in the veracity or effect of these practices. By including the tangible results of this cultural practice, Boyden lays a foundation for his readers which encourages a belief in the Windigo and the need to exterminate it to ensure clan survival. He describes how Micah's wife succumbs to hunger and fear, resorts to cannibalism, and afterwards descends into madness. At times she "begged and pleaded in a child's voice" and at "nighttime her voice went hoarse so that she sounded like some monster growling in a language we did not understand" (44). Boyden then explicitly states that "Micah's wife and baby were becoming *Windigo*" and that her "madness can surely spread in these bad times" (44-5). The description of Niska's father killing the Windigo is brief, but includes the process of sprinkling "crushed cedar into the fire and muttering prayers" (45). Finally, the killing takes place:

He didn't take long to do it. His eyes looked sad. He leaned down and whispered something I could not hear into her ear. She immediately went slack and her eyes reflected fear and then expectation as he straddled her chest. My father covered

her face with a blanket and placed his hands on her neck. He looked up above him and the muscles of his body tensed. Her feet quivered, then went still. (45)

The relatively short sentences and list-like communication of the events speak to the practicality and necessity of this ceremony to community survival. Unlike the police who see this act as a murder, Niska's father and people know that Windigos are real and that they need protection from them. Though the colonial world within the novel does not accept the sovereignty of the Cree and arrests Niska's father, which leads to his death in prison and their clan's disintegration, Boyden, through his writing style, attempts to show that these worlds can exist concomitantly.

Though Boyden sets his novel for the most part in the battlefields of Europe during World War 1, a significant amount of the narrative takes place in Canada before, during and after the war. By tying these locations together through narratives recounted by Xavier and Niska, Boyden is able to apply certain Aboriginal concepts, like that of the Windigo, not only to the battle between Natives and the Canadian government, but to the atrocities of the First World War. In an interview with Herb Wylie, Boyden states that he thought World War 1 "made far more sense to write about [than writing about World War II] because it was a very difficult time for Canadian Natives, while at the same time it was the first modern conflict" (221). He goes on to say that "Native people were being forced onto reservations, their language taken away, customs taken away, children taken away to residential school. So there was this really insidious battle going, involving Native people and the government" (221). Throughout the novel, Boyden uses the figure of the Windigo to metaphorically represent these different battles: the war, residential school, and new ways of ordering Cree culture based on European law. As seen in previous chapters, Elijah embodies the Windigo, at least in Xavier's opinion, and in Chapter One we have

seen depictions of actual Windigo possessions in Cree encampments throughout the James Bay region. But Boyden also uses this Cree (and Ojibwe) figure as a metaphor for more insidious battles taking place in Canada and in Europe. Because Boyden reconfigures these battles as Windigos, they are “culturally reconsidered in accordance with a distinctly First Nations cosmology” (Visvis 225) and as such represent a specifically Cree interpretation of colonial events.

It is important to contextualize the way narratives and stories are used within the communities being written about, and to provide an understanding of how the novels function in connection to traditional narratives when studying the construction of narrative in specific Cree novels. A concept that can be applied to the novels is Cree narrative memory, which includes the act of “public remembering.” Neal McLeod states in *Cree Narrative Memory* that public remembering “is important because it gets to the heart of Cree narrative history” (13). Cree narrative memory is defined by McLeod as “a large, intergenerational, collective memory” (8) that is “more than simply storytelling” but instead relates to the echo metaphor which describes how the past connects to the present through stories (6). Storytelling is a major part of Cree narrative memory and a “skilled storyteller strings narratives together to suit a particular audience,” and while he describes events and experiences, he “also analyzes th[ese] experience[s]” (7). These experiences are then “reflected upon and critically examined, and they are brought to life by being integrated into the experience of the storyteller and audience” (8). Therefore, the importance of stories lies not only in their connection to Cree spirituality, but also in the capacity of storytellers to connect younger generations with eras and individuals which they may not know firsthand. These stories not only offer the possibility of forging connections

to the past, but create “traces of experience through which the listeners [can] make sense of their own lives and experiences” (13).

Both Highway’s and Boyden’s novels embody the concept of public remembering on different scales. As mentioned in Chapter one, Highway has stated that he wrote *Kiss of the Fur Queen* for a Cree readership. In this sense, then, the novel in its entirety, form and function, is a public memory (though not strictly autobiographical) of the residential school and city experiences of two Cree brothers written with a Cree and, more broadly speaking, an Indigenous audience in mind. Highway embodies the artistic practice of creative adaption of Cree and European models of storytelling and creation in his novel and as such offers a framework of practices, stories, and potential lessons which readers may apply to their own lives in order to commence a process of healing, learning and adaptation. Though Boyden’s novel is arguably intended for a much larger audience, it is still written from a specifically Indigenous perspective. As such the novel as an object does not fit the specifically Cree definitions of public remembering; however, the moral obligation which McLeod says is inherent in these acts is found within Niska’s narrative thread. Throughout the work Boyden constantly refers to Niska’s autobiographical stories as “medicine” that help heal Xavier. In alternating chapters, Xavier slips back into his own memories as he listens to Niska’s stories, indicating the power of public memory to help him make sense of the atrocities he witnessed while at war. In this way he is able to apply the lessons Niska’s stories contain to his own life and experiences, while reconnecting with a narrative of an historical collective memory which he was not alive to experience.

The connections between Xavier’s family history and his application of the Windigo to specifically colonial events and situations relates to the concept of Cree narrative memory and

the act of public remembering. A primary element of this memory is its focus on stories which derive from experience, either of the individual reciting the tale, or his or her ancestors, and “[k]nowledge within this paradigm of knowing comes from what you have seen and what you have internalized” (McLeod13). The stories Niska tells Xavier are about her experiences before he was born. She tells him about her father’s role as a *hookimah* who died in prison for practicing his cultural traditions, the time he witnessed her killing a Windigo when he was just a young boy, her role as a diviner for her people and her visions. These stories act as a medicine in the novel which help Xavier make sense of his actions during the war, specifically his killing of Elijah whom he thought had gone Windigo, and connect Xavier to his past. They directly influence the way he interprets the world around him and as such shape the way Boyden writes the novel itself. By extension the novel becomes about community and individual healing and maintaining Indigenous beliefs and practices. Despite the gruesome and often depressing tone of the novel, Boyden ends his narrative with a vision of a living and adapting Cree people:

Children. I see children. They are happy and play games by the bank. The bank of the Great Salt Bay. They are two boys, naked, their brown backs to me as they throw little stones into the water. Their hair is long in the old way and is braided with strips of red cloth. But this isn’t the past. It is what is still to come. (381)

The boys are assumed to be sons of Xavier. Through his own narrative memory, which is constructed from his own experiences and those passed on to him by Niska, Xavier is able to keep traditional Cree values alive in a Canada shaped by colonial relations.

Boyden’s iteration of the sweat lodge is an important element of the novel in terms of its potential as a work that celebrates and continues Cree culture. It is invoked several times in

detail and its strongest association is its potential to help those who participate in it answer questions. It is used by Niska and the boys before they go to war, Xavier when he is trying to figure out whether he should kill Elijah for becoming Windigo, and again at the end of the novel. Niska constructs a sweat lodge because she feels it is her last hope for curing Xavier from his sickness. Like the earlier descriptions of Cree ceremonies it is gone through step-by-step in great detail: “I acknowledge the four directions and then the earth, the sun, the sky, and the moon, sprinkling a little sage onto the rocks as I do. I thank *Gitchi Manitou* for Nephew’s return. I sit and breathe the steam, open myself to the manitous” (378). Niska and Xavier go through four rounds in the sweat lodge, but it is during the third round that the healing takes place. Niska feels the “pain that Nephew has carried inside of himself for so long... leaving his body and swirling around this place” (380) and states that it swirls around the tent scratching her and trying to enter her. Eventually it leaves and another presence, presumably Elijah, enters the space. Xavier communicates with the presence and asks its forgiveness. The sweat lodge scene brings together several elements that have been at work throughout the novel: the importance of a spiritual grounding and a continued belief in tradition; the familial connection between Elijah, Xavier, and Niska; and the possibility of redemption and continuance to be found within Cree history.

Based on the events of the novel, and Elijah’s death at the hands of Xavier which was covered in Chapter Three, Boyden seems to support a more strictly traditional and less adaptive mode of survival than Highway. It is Elijah, the character in the novel with the least grounding in Cree narrative memory and tradition who does not make it through the war, while his counterpart who spent far less time at residential school survives through the application of traditional Cree customs, namely storytelling and the sweat lodge. Though Xavier does adapt Cree customs to the

present moment, specifically his prayers and burial traditions while overseas, in the end he and Niska return to the bush, away from Canadian culture, and it is only there that he is finally able to heal. As such, Boyden's work can be seen as a proponent of an essentially authentic or traditionalist approach to cultural survival as opposed to Highway's creative adaptation of tradition, art, and spirituality to the contemporary moment. Some implications of Boyden's literary strategy are that though he tries to offer a different perspective on World War One and the legacy of colonialism in Canada, he does so in such a way that relies on images of an authentically pure Aboriginal identity which is untouched by or which rejects colonial influences. This rejection ultimately ignores an integral aspect of Aboriginal history in Canada, and though Boyden seemingly tries to assert that Aboriginal peoples have a distinct history of their own, he does not represent a dynamic or evolving approach to authentic Indigenous identity. The Aboriginal identity he represents through the creation of his characters and the very structure and plot of his novel, as mentioned in Chapter Two, is one that relies on a complete reversion to traditional ways of life and so can cause representational problems due to its potential reliance on the trope of the "dying Indian." This trope essentially leads to a misconception of what it means to be Aboriginal in the contemporary world because for the most part this trope was created by white Europeans and relied on stereotypes of Aboriginal life which more often than not were untrue. Because this European-created Aboriginal identity, which we have already seen effects Elijah's construction of identity, does not really exist, there is no possibility of ever becoming "authentically Indian." This is not to say that Boyden creates stereotypical representations of Aboriginal characters because as we have seen he includes many distinctly Cree perspectives and traditions in his novel, but rather that the overall message of his



novel creates potential problems for what it means to be Aboriginal in Canada today. It is virtually impossible to live a life completely cut off from Euro-Canadian contact, and if that is the criteria for what constitutes authentic Aboriginal experience, then the novel would indicate that there are no more authentic Aboriginals.

As has been demonstrated, both authors use distinct narrative methods to create depictions of reality which differ from the Western cultural norm by incorporating traditional Cree cultural practices and ways of seeing and interpreting the world within their narratives. In so doing, their works create a new type of literary realism based on an Aboriginal worldview that endorses “the writing of healing texts that transcend portrayals of Aboriginals as victims (146), and that depict ‘a culture alive and well’” (Gordon 120). The agency of the characters and the authors who have created them speak to the continuance of Cree traditions and beliefs and their insertion into a wider cultural dialogue to varying degrees of success. Rather than seeing the interpretations of reality through a Cree spiritual lens as aspects a world separate from Western reality, the novels bring to light Indigenous perspectives shaped by the distinctive worldviews of their characters. In so doing, the result is not a hybridized, a supernatural, or a magical text but a different way of representing reality that is not based on what can or cannot be empirically verified through sensory data. Spirituality, then, and the way that spirituality has been either demonized by Euro-Canadian colonial culture or nurtured by specific family members, is an integral aspect of what constitutes reality for the characters in these two novels and has the capacity to help them heal from past physical and psychological abuses.

## Conclusion

Recent Aboriginal history in Canada has been marked by the legacy of the residential school system and its policies of institutionalized racism and attempted assimilation of Aboriginal culture. The effects of these policies still reverberate within Aboriginal communities to this day and are characterized by individual struggles to accept Aboriginal heritage and reconnect to traditional culture. The NNADAP's claim that individual healing is a product of a healthy community and one's connection to it serves as a foundation from which to interrogate Boyden's and Highway's novels. This project examined the authors' use of traditional Cree spiritual beliefs to create literary representations of Aboriginal communities in the contemporary Canadian and European environment. In so doing, it becomes evident that the authors are creating representations of reality, using realist writing techniques combined with traditional Cree narrative traditions and perspectives, which differ from Western, empirically-based representations. Therefore, the authors create a new style of representation which I have called Aboriginal realism, which has at its base the theory that Native spiritual beliefs are an integral part of reality and shape the way the characters perceive the world. This project also analyzes the authors' creation of Aboriginal identities through the four main characters in the novels and demonstrates the obstacles towards achieving healthy communities, individuals and identities that stem from residential schooling and its invalidation of Native culture. In their representations of these characters, the authors demonstrate that though there are still steps to be taken towards complete cultural healing, Native cultures continue to thrive and adapt despite systematic attempts to eradicate them. Thus, this examination of these authors' works enters into a dialogue with other works that seek to redress the belief that Aboriginal culture has been

irreversibly damaged by colonial contact and that demonstrate alternative ways of seeing and being in the world.

Through the process of enfolding Cree spiritual elements within their realistic narratives, these authors create worlds in which the spiritual is every bit as real as the empirically verifiable facts of reality. These elements shape not only how the narrative worlds are constructed, but also how the characters interpret those worlds based on their specific relationships to their Cree cultures. Thus, certain aspects of Euro-Canadian culture, such as Catholicism, residential schools, and World War One, are reconceptualized through a culturally specific lens which depicts them as the Cree cannibalistic figure of the Windigo or Weetigo. This representation presents readers with Cree-specific ways of interpreting historical events. Because Highway had a Cree, and more broadly speaking, Aboriginal, audience in mind when he wrote his novel, his work can be interpreted as an embodiment of how a connection to culture helps heal individuals and how individuals, by pointing out the problems which still exist, can help heal their culture. The intended audience of Boyden's novel is arguably not as culturally specific as Highway's, but he still relies on Cree spiritual practices and beliefs to shape his narrative and to introduce his readers to an Aboriginal history with which they may not be familiar.

The characters that these authors create provide readers with models of different methods with which to deal with sexual and cultural abuse. Highway demonstrates through his characters how racist ideologies can be internalized and cause psychological disconnections between individual and culture. Though Jeremiah initially rejects his Cree culture due to the racist teachings of the residential school, Highway demonstrates how he is able to create a new sense of Aboriginal identity based on a creative adaptation of his cultural heritage to Western modes of

representation by connecting them to his spirituality. Boyden's depiction of Xavier is problematized due to its reliance on a return to strict traditionalism and a rejection of Euro-Canadian culture as the method by which he recovers from his trauma. This depiction, rather than demonstrating an adaptive cultural identity, is static and situates authentic Aboriginality as something to be found in the past rather than in the future. Despite these representational problems, the underlying message of a connection to culture and community as integral for individual health and well-being fits within the scope of this project. Though not all the characters survive their residential school or war experiences, their deaths illustrate problems within their communities, such as a continued adherence to Western-imposed ideological systems like Catholicism, gender roles, or stereotypical constructions of Aboriginal identity.

The approach to Indigenous literature undertaken in this thesis provides an opportunity for scholars to interrogate Aboriginal novels not only as fictional works of art, but also as examples of the healing and reconnection to community many authors see as necessary for creating positive identities. The novels themselves serve to reconnect their authors and readers to the Aboriginal communities being written about and so embody the cultural connections being written about. As such, an investigation of other works of Indigenous literature can be studied through the lens of Aboriginal realism in order to illuminate the specific ways in which other authors conceptualize the present state of their communities or attempt to revitalize their cultural traditions by reconfiguring them in terms of contemporary interactions with Euro-North American culture.

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