

Communicable Stories:  
HIV in Canadian Aboriginal Literature

by

Katherine Shwetz

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
August 2011

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Dated: August 31, 2011

Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Readers: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DATE: August 31, 2011

AUTHOR: Katherine Shwetz

TITLE: Communicable Stories: HIV in Canadian Aboriginal Literature

DEPARTMENT OR SCHOOL: Department of English

DEGREE: MA CONVOCATION: October YEAR: 2011

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Signature of Author

For Keith Dreaver

1957-2010

for sitting me down  
and telling me stories

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## Abstract

The devastation wrought by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Aboriginal communities is both physical and metaphorical, as the stigmas associated with the virus mediate the way it is both understood and experienced. This thesis examines the role of HIV in Canadian Aboriginal literature, with an eye to the specific ways that these narratives about HIV relate back to real-world understandings of the epidemic. The works of Tomson Highway, Jordan Wheeler, Beth Brandt, and Gregory Scofield demonstrate how HIV/AIDS is frequently tied to colonial histories and personal experiences of disconnect, alienation, and abuse. HIV operates at the boundaries of these texts, drawing connections between otherwise disparate narratives, highlighting stigmas within communities, and focussing on differently marginalized communities of Aboriginal people in Canada. These authors draw from traditional understandings of storytelling, using narrative to incite important discussions about HIV/AIDS, and to work towards greater acceptance and inclusion of HIV-positive people in Aboriginal communities.

## List of Abbreviations Used

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Virus
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
PHAC	Public Health Agency of Canada

## Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Carrie Dawson, whose expertise and careful guidance repeatedly saved me from panic, confusion, and abject fear.

I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Marjorie Stone, and my third reader, Dr. Dean Irvine, for their excellent and thought-provoking feedback on my thesis.

Without the support and friendship of my family, Dr. Kevin Flynn, Dr. Pamela Downe, Sherri Doell, and the many people I met at AIDS Saskatoon, I would have had neither the courage nor the inspiration required to undertake this project. Their guidance and presence in my life has been invaluable.

In what has been a truly utopic year of friendship and support, I find myself unable to express the gratitude I have for my fellow M.A. cohorts, save to say that the chance to work alongside them has been a moving and extraordinary experience. Thanks!

My research has been generously supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by Dalhousie University.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

*An epidemic is a shared disaster played out on the bodies of the afflicted*

*-Michael Denny*

The headline is attention-grabbing, almost tabloid-like: “HIV killer has high libido and could reoffend, Crown says.” The June 27, 2011 story is, in fact, from *The Globe and Mail*, and details the possible conviction of Johnson Aziga for murder. Aziga is HIV positive, and has been in jail since 2003 for having sex with 11 women without informing them of his HIV positive status. The article is filled with the kind of associations that frequently accompany stories about HIV: Aziga's “abnormally high libido” is blamed for his violent actions, and the author carefully frames Aziga as a deviant member of society. The article makes a point of nothing that Aziga is an “Ugandan immigrant” whose “sex drive 'is head and shoulders above' the average man's” and that since “his need for sex is not going to be satisfied” [his libido could] could deter him from disclosing his HIV status to potential partners, [Crown attorney] Ms. Shea argued.” The story ticks off a number of standard features of stories about HIV: a mention of foreign-ness, deviant sexuality, and—above all else—*difference* and boundary crossing. After all, Aziga is carefully set up as completely different than the “average man.” The issue is not whether or not Aziga was in the wrong, or should be convicted—the point of interest is that Aziga, an HIV positive person, is marked as somehow “different,” in this case by his apparently abnormal “high libido.” “Normal” people, the assumption is, do not get HIV; Aziga's immoral actions and HIV positive status are one and the same.

Comments made on the online version of the article reflect this sense of deviance

and threat—in response to one commenter saying Aziga should be castrated, another responded “Better yet, ship him off to a lab somewhere [sic] and experiment on him! He would be a great test bed for any new HIV drugs, or anything else that needs to be tested.” It is not only Aziga's case that reflects this connection between HIV and deviance—in a *Globe and Mail* article from April 20 of 2011, for example, a health worker in Alberta was found to be HIV positive, and one commenter wrote that since the worker tested positive for both HIV and HCV, they must be someone who was “a) a drug addict and b) uses dirty needles,” although the article itself provides no information to support such a conclusion. And in yet another instance of the HIV-deviance connection, in response to an article in *The Globe and Mail* about the UN declaration on universal access to AIDS treatment, one commenter writes “If you want to go around sticking it in with out protection cause it is would be like eating a candy with the wrapper on (actual quote from a black man in South Africa) then so sad that you will be dying faster than I will.” Comments like these reveal the complex social meanings that accompany HIV infection, and the way that these associations assume narratives of so-called “deviant” behaviour or personality traits.

Such stories are common; not all of them replay the same “dangerous-sex-offender” record, but a distressing amount of them reflect the perception that HIV is a threatening virus that accompanies an already-threatening or deviant person. In Canada, these stigmas are complicated by HIV's over-representation in Aboriginal populations, communities that are already frequently (and historically) discriminated against by the Eurocentric hegemony. In the Public Health Agency of Canada's 2010 Epidemiology update for HIV/AIDS, the reports show that despite only representing 3.8% of the total

Canadian population<sup>1</sup>, Aboriginal people represent about 12.5% of all new HIV infections—nearly 4 times the rate of non-Aboriginal people. The proportion of HIV infections in Aboriginal people is also higher among younger people than non-Aboriginal. HIV/AIDS continues to be dramatically overrepresented in Aboriginal peoples, and reported cases of new infections continues to rise at an alarming rate, particularly in my home province of Saskatchewan. While a good deal of anthropological and sociological research has been done on the situation<sup>2</sup>, there has been a glaring lack of attention paid to how HIV/AIDS *means* or is storied in Aboriginal communities. What does it mean to write about, and to write characters living with, HIV/AIDS in a Canadian Aboriginal context? What do these representations say about the conceptualization of HIV/AIDS as both lived and metaphorical?

In this thesis, I intend to redress this gap by examining the metaphorical and discursive impact of storying HIV/AIDS in Canadian Aboriginal literature. I ground this project in the assumption that the way HIV/AIDS is narrativized—or, to put it differently, the way that HIV/AIDS figures in stories told by Canadian Aboriginal people—will not only have specific resonance for Aboriginal communities, but will also reflect the way that the stories people tell and the way their lives are lived layer onto one another. Using Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Beth Brandt's *Food & Spirits*, Jordan Wheeler's *Brothers in Arms*, and Gregory Scofield's *Native Canadiana: Poems from the*

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1 It is worth noting, however, that a number of reserves didn't participate in the census, and ethnographic data was not available from all regions. Despite these shortcoming, the rates of HIV/AIDS (particularly in Saskatchewan and among women) in Aboriginal communities are distinct and alarming.

2 See, for example, Waldram et. Al's *Aboriginal Health in Canada 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*; the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network website; or Craib et. al, “Risk factors for elevated HIV incidence among Aboriginal injection drug users in Vancouver”

*Urban Rez*, I will look at how these different stories use HIV/AIDS. While all of the texts I am examining include HIV as part of their plots, HIV is not always deployed in the same way, nor does it have the same effect on the texts. Despite this, some similarities between the uses emerge, suggesting that HIV/AIDS has a literary impact in Canadian Aboriginal literature that is specific to that community. It would be overly simplistic to assume that HIV/AIDS means the same thing for all Canadian Aboriginal communities, and it is not my intention to make sweeping generalized statements about how the virus figures in story across diverse populations. Instead, my analysis is in line with a broader social context as seen by Jo-Ann Episkenew:

Because Indigenous writers are cognizant of their diverse audience, they have embedded a multiplicity of implied readers within the text of their narratives, so that each category of implied reader will understand the narrative somewhat differently, depending on their societal positionality (13)

Critically engaging with the representations of HIV/AIDS in this literature demonstrates how the HIV virus, which has had such a powerful impact on Canadian Aboriginal communities, often speaks to similar issues of discrimination and marginalization common among Canadian communities.

In HIV/AIDS activism, a phrase that often gets thrown around is “we all live with AIDS”—implying, of course, that the social impact of AIDS is broad enough to be discussed on a global spectrum. Despite the discursive attempts to limit HIV to figures like Aziga or the HIV-positive health care worker, the truth of the matter is that every person who has encountered or heard of HIV is living with it: with its assumptions, its stigmas, and the fear it brings to otherwise quotidian interactions. In a world where

acronyms like HIV and AIDS have social meanings that complicate and condition their medical definitions, the language of contagion in literature is a layered and allusive one. As such, the presence of HIV/AIDS in a text is not merely the presence of a virus, but of a host of anxiety-inducing stigmas that socially contextualize the illness. It is impossible to “just” write HIV/AIDS, as the mere mention of the virus in a literary context brings with it the whole host of related associations and stigmas that accompany the virus in real life. HIV has been, since its inception, a virus fraught with consistent, constantly evolving, and often outrageous stigmas, as evidenced in the range of HIV origin myths that locate the virus everywhere from a bioterrorism lab to monkeys in the African jungle (Goldstein).

Considering the remarkable host of meanings that are part of HIV as trope, the literary import of the virus is complex. Stephen Kruger writes of this phenomenon that within such diverse discourses as those of biological science, information science, the mass media, popular culture, medicine, and politics, viruses, particularly HIV, are invoked simultaneously as linguistic entities with 'meanings' of their own and as forces that confound linguistic process and meaning. (3)<sup>3</sup>

HIV both acts as a trope in and of itself, but also influences other aspects of a text and the lives it represents: the presence of HIV in a literary narrative colours the entirety of the story. Paula Treichler, speaking of the complexity of attempting to “get” HIV/AIDS, writes that “in multiple, fragmentary, and often contradictory ways, we struggle to achieve some sort of understanding of AIDS, a reality that is frightening, widely publicized, yet finally neither directly nor fully knowable” (11). The constantly

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<sup>3</sup> Kruger’s excellent *AIDS Narratives* analyzes the ways HIV is constructed in scientific literature and reports

multiplying meanings of HIV/AIDS lend the virus a metaphoric fluidity that lends itself to all kinds of meanings—as Treichler argues, “the AIDS epidemic is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings of signification [. . .] try as we might to treat AIDS as 'an infectious disease and nothing more,' meanings continue to multiply wildly and at an extraordinary rate” (11). Susan Sherwin details how AIDS has variably been understood in a wide range of stigmatized ways:

AIDS is a state associated with a variety of illnesses (even calling it a disease is metaphorical) that is variously understood as (1) a modern-day plague, (2) the retribution of God, (3) a disease of poverty and neglect, (4) an artifact or a myth introduced by the right (West) to control the behavior of gays (Africans), (5) an assault on a besieged community, (6) a form of genocide, (7) a death sentence, or (8) a chronic disease. (345)

The different meanings of HIV/AIDS have been investigated by numerous literary critics, the majority of whom concentrate on the virus in gay communities<sup>4</sup>. While, as Treichler has commented, HIV/AIDS resists stable categories and unchanging meanings, there are metaphors that are routinely associated with, or make use of, HIV. For the purposes of this thesis, the recurrence of military metaphors, a fixation on contagion, the aforementioned association between HIV and deviance, the perceived “foreign” nature of the virus, and the simultaneously contemporary yet historicized nature of the virus are most important. These different uses of HIV intersect, overlapping one another to form a lexicon of anxiety about boundaries and the practices of transgression: repeatedly in the

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4 See, for instance, Denny, Michael. “AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture.”; Weeks, Jeffrey, “Post-Modern AIDS?”; or Tougan, Jason. “Testimony and the Subjects of AIDS Writing.”

texts, HIV is associated with borders, either in the construction or crossing of them.

Susan Sontag's seminal work *AIDS and its Metaphors* identifies a number of metaphors that are commonly associated with HIV/AIDS, as

the metaphor implements the way particularly dreaded diseases are envisaged as an alien 'other,' as enemies are in a modern war; and the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims. Victims suggest innocence. And innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt. (99)

The military metaphors that Sontag describes in *AIDS and its Metaphors* continue to be used, as HIV infection is figured in warfare terminology and—conversely—relationships between groups of “warring” people are figured in the language of contagion. Treichler refines Sontag's perception of military metaphors to a more contemporary language when dealing with HIV/AIDS, as

the evolution of a conception of the AIDS virus as a top flight secret agent—a James Bond of secret agents [ . . . ] Indeed, it is so shifting and uncertain that we might even acknowledge our own historical moment more specifically by giving the AIDS virus a postmodern metaphor and identity: a terrorist's terrorist, an Abu Nidal of viruses. (31, 33)

Sherwin also comments on the lived experience of such military metaphors, as she discusses how, in a medical setting:

when doctors imagine their work as being engaged in a 'war' against disease they are likely to think of only certain kinds of strategies for responding to diseases in

patients (e.g. aggressive, technological), and to ignore other, potentially valuable ones. (345)

These metaphors are often couched in rhetorics of contagion, a language of contact that foregrounds the interpersonal dimension of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker explore what it means to discuss contagion, as it “required contact, but it always implies more than this: it implies absorption, invasion, vulnerability, the breaking of a boundary imagined as secure in which the other becomes part of the self” (4). Margaret Pelling speaks to the continued relevance of the contagion metaphor “as an idea, particularly a negative idea expressing a sense of threat, crowding, or contamination, contagion has proved remarkably persistent in western culture, and present usage probably owes more than it would admit to this tradition” (15). Margrit Shildrick writes that “as the realisation of a contaminatory threat, contagion can figure any transgression of the categories of sameness and difference, any breach in the unity of the embodied self” (155). As an infectious disease, discourses of contagion often accompany the representation of HIV/AIDS. Often, the literal contagion of the virus is paralleled in the ideological contagion of certain values. The discourses of contagion surrounding HIV/AIDS tie back into the military metaphors as well: in essence, a battlefield contains one group attempting to prevent another group from victory, a battle that occurs, in a sense, in the bodies of people infected with HIV.

The repetition of military metaphors and discourses of contagion also informs the continual emphasis in social discourse of HIV as a foreign, or alien virus to the harmed community. Both Susan Sontag and Paula Treichler discuss the “foreign” quality that is perceived in HIV/AIDS, with Sontag arguing that “one feature of the usual script for



plague [and, by historical extension, HIV]—[is that] the disease invariably comes from somewhere else” (135). The idea that HIV/AIDS is always the invading virus from somewhere else and not emergent from within the community can be read as a backlash to the powerful victim-blaming that surrounds HIV-positive people. While HIV/AIDS is not always understood as a colonial disease, in a Canadian Aboriginal context the already-present history of communicable diseases and Aboriginal communities provides a colonial narrative for HIV to take part in. The fixation on HIV as a disease from elsewhere echoes the historical exploitation Canadian Aboriginal communities have suffered as a result of European diseases from which they had no immunity. The perception of HIV as a foreign disease reinforces awareness of the ongoing project of neocolonialism, with HIV standing in for other, older, instances of abuse.

The historical import of the virus in Canadian Aboriginal communities is reflective of the relationship between HIV/AIDS and the past. The virus is both definitively contemporary and yet part of a much longer history of epidemics, particularly the plague. Jeffrey Weeks writes that

wherever the origins, AIDS emerged at a particular historical moment that irrevocably constructed it as a cultural entity as much as an anguished individual and collective experience. It emerged at a time when the reaction against social liberalism was gathering force. (133)

Similarly, Michael Denny argues that “AIDS in our time is an *event*, a calamity, like a forest fire, like the blitz of London” (37). Sontag in particular takes up the HIV-plague comparison, arguing that HIV/AIDS and the plague are represented in similar ways, as in contrast to cancer, understood in a modern way as a disease incurred by (and

revealing of) individuals, AIDS is understood in a premodern way, as a disease incurred by people both as individuals and as members of a 'risk group'—that neutral-sounding, bureaucratic category which also revives the ancient idea of a tainted community that illness has judged. (134)

Kruger also observes that one of the most prevalent narratives about HIV/AIDS “which might be called an epidemiological or population narrative—involves not the individual person living with HIV or AIDS but the historical trajectory of the epidemic” (75).

HIV/AIDS, thus, is characterized by its distinctly contemporary nature, but also by its character as a virus implicated in historical narratives of epidemic.

All of these tropes associated with HIV/AIDS—military metaphors, discourses of contagion, foreign threats, and a boundary-crossing relationship to history—have particular resonance in the Canadian Aboriginal community, where histories of colonialism, invasion, and exploitation dovetail with the boundary-making and boundary-crossing metaphors of HIV/AIDS. The particularly harsh impact that the epidemic has had on Aboriginal communities lends HIV resonance in Aboriginal research in a very particular way. The concerns about invasion and the historical tie to other epidemics mean something different and much more dire in Aboriginal communities, where the insurgence of epidemic into Aboriginal lives was the cause of (and sometimes fault of) European immigrants and explorers. From the perspective of Aboriginal people and literature, HIV/AIDS has meaning particularly reflects its Canadian context.

In order to examine the different meanings of HIV/AIDS in Aboriginal communities, I will look at Highway, Brandt, Wheeler, and Scofield as a sampling of works that include HIV as a significant or meaningful part of their narratives. The

parameters of my text selection were quite basic: all of these texts are Canadian, relatively recent, deal in some way with HIV, and are authored by self-identified Aboriginal people. Although the scope of this thesis does not allow for the kind of cultural specificity that a larger project might take, I couch this discussion in the reality that Aboriginal communities across the board are disproportionately affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic; to quote the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network's mission statement:

CAAN is a national Aboriginal organization and as such is committed to addressing the issues of HIV within a Native context. Although the beliefs of Aboriginal people vary widely from region to region and from person to person, [CAAN] has made a commitment to conduct its activities in a spirit of Native wholeness and healing. This disease can only be overcome by respecting our differences and accentuating our unity of spirit and strength.

I approached the texts from the assumption that the way HIV/AIDS was depicted would not only be reflective of wider cultural attitudes to the disease, but would itself influence these attitudes through its literary depiction. In short, that reading the virus as metaphor impacts attitudes towards the virus, just as those attitudes themselves may have reflected onto the metaphors of the virus. In each chapter, I explore the literary meaning of HIV/AIDS in Aboriginal communities from a different perspective, looking both at the way the virus is represented and constructed in the text, and the role and wider purpose the texts themselves may have vis-a-vis an understanding of HIV/AIDS.

In my first chapter, I look at Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and examine the way that HIV acts as a kind of linking metaphor that brings together otherwise disparate

stories into one coherent, cohesive text. While HIV only appears in the latter portion of the novel, when it does it swiftly raises a number of issues about past abuse and present behaviour. The text troubles the connection between HIV and deviant behaviour by demonstrating some of the many different facts that may lead someone towards an HIV infection. The personal and collective stories of abuse in the lives of the Okimasis brothers feed into the later appearance of HIV. Despite this history, HIV threatens to impair the ability of the brothers to adequately communicate with their communities, yet the storying of the virus allows a cathartic reconnection with the past.

In the second chapter, I look at both Brandt's story "This Place" from *Food & Spirits* and Wheeler's "Exposure" from *Brothers in Arms*. The two short stories both have similar plot lines: an HIV-positive gay Aboriginal man returns to the reserve from the city to die of AIDS, and encounters change in reserve life upon his return. Using the framework of recovery narratives, theorized by Nancy Van Styvendale, I look at how Wheeler and Brandt differently work within the parameters of recovery narratives to discuss the way that HIV impacts home, and the way homecoming figures in a particularly meaningful way for Aboriginal people. Both HIV-positive men in the stories deal (in different ways) with experiences of homophobia, and I explore how the existence of homophobia in Aboriginal reserve communities speaks not only to the complications of returning home, but to the "infection" of these communities by wider ideological forces of colonialism. In this way, the HIV infection in the bodies of the men returning home is mirrored in the way that colonialism has "spread" to the communities themselves.

In my final chapter, I engage with Gregory Scofield's *Native Canadiana: Songs*

*from the Urban Rez.* Scofield's poetry is heavily invested in the urban experiences of Aboriginal people, and the poems look at the realities and practicalities of living in the city as an Aboriginal person. For Scofield's speakers, life in the city has its own particular challenges. Unlike Brandt and Wheeler, whose characters refer to life in the city, but spend little time actually depicting it. Scofield's poetry turns a critical yet engaged eye towards urban existence. The increasingly significant community of Aboriginal people living in urban environments makes it worthwhile to explore how HIV might mean differently in the context of urban life. Scofield expands the idea of the rez as a space of Aboriginal experience to the city, reinforcing the idea that the urban life can be just as significant for Aboriginal people.

As a whole, my project seeks to redress the critical gap I see in literary criticism that looks at Aboriginal literature and also at HIV/AIDS. While many anthropological studies focus on the lived experiences of HIV/AIDS in Aboriginal communities, literary studies have not matched this critical body. There are numerous studies that look at metaphors of HIV/AIDS and how those metaphors mean in texts, there is a complete lack of focus on how such meanings might change in the specific context of Canadian Aboriginal communities. Considering the enormous significance of story and orature to many Aboriginal communities, the stories virus has particular meaning to different people. Jo-Ann Episkenew writes that “Indigenous people have believed in the healing power of language and stories since time immemorial, and today's Indigenous writers continue to apply this belief to the creation of works of literature and theatre in English” (11), and this healing purpose can be seen in all works I study. Ranging from homophobia, to drug use, to urban identity and Two-Spiritedness, all of the texts cast

their voices beyond the fictional world, seeking through story to heal the trauma and stigma that accompany HIV.

## Chapter 2: Tricksters and Traumas HIV in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

As Gabriel Okimasis, one of the protagonists in Tomson Highway's 1998 novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, struggles with the revelation that he is HIV positive, he wonders “how to explain the virus in his bloodstream, let alone how he had come by it?” (292-93). Gabriel's life, and that of his brother Jeremiah, has been marked not only by illness, but by a long personal and cultural history of trauma, racialized discrimination, and exploitation—a history that led Gabriel to high risk behaviours such as unprotected sex and eventual exposure to the HIV virus. Torn from their home and family on a Northern Manitoba reserve, Jeremiah and Gabriel are forced into residential school, and when they emerge from the school system they have been abused both physically and sexually, cut off from their families, alienated from their language and their cultural identities, and pushed into a Eurocentric world where their identities as Cree men are always already subordinated to the hegemonic forms of Eurocentric identity. Despite the assimilationist ethos at the residential school, which was ostensibly to incorporate them into the dominant society. Jeremiah and Gabriel go through their adult lives consistently feeling like outsiders; to quote Homi Bhabha, Jeremiah and Gabriel are “*almost the same but not quite* [. . .] *Almost the same but not white*” (89, italics in original), barred from complete assimilation into the world around them.

The Okimasis brothers constantly find themselves fetishized, stereotyped, and marginalized. Eventually the two brothers achieve a kind of reconciliation with their past, but they are permanently changed by their experiences. Gabriel, a gay man whose homosexual identity is problematically connected to his childhood sexual abuse,

contracts HIV and dies of AIDS related causes<sup>5</sup>. Jeremiah struggles through years of alcohol abuse and repressed memories of trauma, and finally comes to terms with his past in a way that is, at best, tentative. Highway's text, which took forms ranging from “a stage play, a made-for-TV movie, and an estimated eight-hundred-page epic” before finally being structured as a novel (McKegney “From Trickster Poetics” 80) is semi-autobiographical: like Gabriel, Highway's brother Rene died of AIDS, and the Highway brothers were also victims of abuse in the residential school system (McKegney). However, as Sam McKegney is careful to point out, reading *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as autobiographical is ultimately unproductive, particularly when considering Highway's interest in Cree traditions of storytelling and orature. In the novel, the *act* of storying is almost more important than the relative faithfulness to any facts in Highway's life.

Neal MacLeod argues that collective Cree memory and “Cree narrative imagination [. . .] is essentially the process of expanding our narrative memory in light of new experiences” (98). Highway's inclusion of Cree spiritual figures such as Weesageechuck, the trickster figure, and the Weetigo, a cannibalistic and nightmarish figure aligns the novel with the kind of narrative imagination discussed by MacLeod, as the text uses traditional figures of Cree cultural thought to discuss contemporary issues. Jo-Ann Episkenew also writes that “oral narrative explained the history of the [indigenous] peoples, reinforced cultural practices and norms and articulated the peoples relationship with the world” (4). The many different meanings associated with HIV allow it to work links some of the different stories that fragment the lives of the Okimasis brothers, enabling the otherwise disparate narratives to be read in a more cohesive way that help make sense of how the Okimasis brothers relate to their environments. This

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5 For a more complete discussion of homophobia, see chapter 2.



chapter considers these HIV-connected narratives, insofar as HIV's allusive nature creates an environment that allows the many narratives in the text to be situated as part of more cohesive, larger narratives. Highway's tale of the Okimasis brothers re-articulates Cree stories in order to better reflect the fragmented and contemporary existences that defined the brothers.

“Fragmented and contemporary” is a relatively innocuous way to describe the abuse, racialized discrimination, and marginalization that fill the Okimasis brothers' lives. Sexually, physically, and emotionally abused in residential school, the brothers find themselves unable to integrate back into the once-idyllic home life on the reserve (Sugars). Instead, they are sent to Winnipeg, where they are isolated their life with their parents, and struggle to reconcile their Cree identities with the frequently intolerant and Western world that surrounds them. Jeremiah, in particular, finds it challenging to reconcile his Cree identity with his emerging identity as a Western budding concert pianist; Gabriel is less resistant to his Cree identity than Jeremiah, but his experiences at residential school push him towards high-risk sexual decisions characterized by images of consumption instead of shared pleasure.

For Gabriel, the consequences of his actions are dire: he discovers that he is HIV positive, and eventually dies of AIDS-related causes. HIV only appears in the latter portions of the story, and it is not mentioned as a social concern prior to Gabriel's diagnosis. When HIV does appear, the plethora of complex social meanings that accompany HIV combine with Jeremiah and Gabriel's personal histories to produce narratives rooted in both the individual and the social. HIV is a way to discuss the complex ways that the brothers negotiate their identities and their pasts, including how they dealing with the tensions between contemporary existence and past traditions. Not

only does HIV evoke a range of social assumptions and stigmas tied to the virus, but a longer history of Aboriginal people and “outside” viruses such as smallpox raises its head in the context of HIV. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, HIV’s contemporary context is linked back to longer histories of colonial oppression. Despite this link, the linguistic gap in Cree surrounding HIV signals how inadequately this latest epidemic has been recognized as part of this history—Gabriel asks Jeremiah “How do you say AIDS in Cree, huh? Tell me, what's the word for HIV?” (296). Highway's novel is itself performative, insofar as it participates in a kind of storytelling that is so important for Cree culture—something signalled in the text through the repeated telling of the son of Ayash story (McKegney). The focus on narrative in the text draws connections between different things by storying them—Gabriel's HIV, for instance, is tied to earlier experiences of dislocation, alienation, and abuse, rather than just unprotected sex.

Highway treats HIV not as an isolated issue, but rather as a larger symptom of the consequences of colonialism, racialized discrimination, and abuse. Put differently, Gabriel's individual sexual practices are tied to his HIV infection, but his illness also speaks to the wider “sickness” that resulted from colonial violence and discrimination. Highway's allusive framing of the virus, the sociohistorical resonances that the virus is used to invoke, and the eventual symbolic use of the virus in the act of storytelling speak to the polyvalent nature of HIV as trope, especially as the virus works in the borders between things such as the overlap between Gabriel’s individual health and that of his community. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the presence of HIV associates the virus with other stories of trauma in the text, discursively constructing a larger narrative of abuse in which the virus is both situated as discrete event and metonymically representative of the entire history of colonial exploitation in certain Aboriginal communities.

HIV, as I have previously discussed, is fraught with complex social and cultural meanings; it is somewhat inaccurate to say that someone is “just” HIV positive, as the literal infection by the virus has significant symbolic import. HIV in popular consciousness is still linked to a collective of marginalized behaviours and identities: drug use, sexualities other than heterosexuality, sex work, and racialized identities, to name but a few. As previously cited in the introduction, Paula Treichler writes of how

the AIDs epidemic is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings of signification [. . .] [and] try as we might to treat AIDS as 'an infectious disease' and nothing more, meanings continue to multiply wildly and at an extraordinary rate.” (11)

With Treichler's comments in mind, I mean to interrogate the different meanings that accompany the virus in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Beyond the metaphors used to describe infection and contagion of HIV, the presence of a HIV virus in the text is always socially mediated through the continually multiplying implications of the disease. This social mediation can be seen at work in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, where the cultural understandings of the virus tie HIV back to other experiences of abuse in the lives of the Okimasis brothers, and then situate these personal experiences within a larger history of collective abuse. Wendy Pearson, in a comment that speaks to the remarkable power of the stigmas that surround HIV/AIDS, writes that

colonial discourse has made it possible for Western culture to read the history of AIDS backwards onto the bodies of those infected, marking those bodies as always already diseased through the specific practices [. . .] that supposedly equate homosexuality with vulnerability to the virus (170)

The links that Pearson sees between HIV and homosexuality mirrors the way HIV

infection and abuse are associated in Highway.

The constantly multiplying and increasingly stigmatized symbolic meanings of HIV effectively draw a link between the many experiences of trauma in the text. HIV, when it appears, is not an isolated incident; rather, it is represented as the end point or central consequence of a much longer string of traumatic experiences, none of which are wholly extricable from either one another or from the larger framework of colonialism. To write HIV in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and to read it, is to engage not only in the symbolic and stigmatized connections between certain experiences and the virus but also to see how the virus in the text comes to be representative of all of these abuses, tying the different strands of traumatic experience into a single narrative of infection, catharsis, and death. Kristina Fagan argues that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* “uses Cree storytelling to create a culturally grounded trauma theory that connects the character's past abuse to their adult lives” (215). Although Fagan focusses on the use of humour in Highway's text, but her comments about the relationship between storytelling and the process of coming to terms with past trauma also speak to the way that HIV functions in the novel. Highway uses HIV to discuss the different traumas in the text, and also to root these experiences in the particular cultural and historical moment that surrounds HIV/AIDS. Like Highway's humour as Fagan describes it, storytelling in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* functions to connect the adult experience of HIV with past experiences of abuse.

Narrative, in general, is of particular concern in the text: Highway's decision to ultimately tell this particular story as a novel resonates with Neal Macleod's discussion of narrative memory and Kristina Fagan's comments on culturally appropriate responses to trauma. HIV complicates Gabriel's ability to communicate, impairing speech in a way reminiscent of how colonial exploitation sought to silence him. In Highway's text, HIV

metonymically represents continued colonial exploitation, embodying the painful consequences of living through residential schools and structural violence by marking Gabriel's body with illness and Jeremiah's with addiction. When Jeremiah first notices that Gabriel is taking an unusual amount of medication, Gabriel avoids talking about the “red-and-yellow capsules” (292) that are currently keeping him alive. Brushing Jeremiah off, Gabriel wonders

how to explain pentamidine, let alone *Pneumocystis carinii*, that rare pneumonia one only got when something had kicked the hell out of one's natural immunities? How to explain the virus in his bloodstream, let alone how he had come by it? Please, brother dear, please don't ask (292-93).

Gabriel's symptoms manifest themselves in a visible way, when he finds “himself peering in his dressing-room mirror, studying his tongue, his throat, his palate. Yes indeed, lead-like markings everywhere. Thrush. What next?” (295). The visible symptoms associated with AIDS that appear on Gabriel's throat symbolize the extent to which his illness will impair his ability to communicate in the language and culture that was once a safe haven for him. The impaired communication, in which Gabriel finds that he lacks the mere Cree vocabulary to discuss his illness, echoes the way that the priests and nuns at residential school suppressed the Cree language. Episkenew argues that “stories provide vocabulary for readers to discuss trauma for which they might not have vocabulary in their lives” (17). This is borne out in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, where Gabriel eventually finds a way to voice his trauma, despite the lack of vocabulary he has for it, and to resist the oppressive silencing of colonial authority and HIV. Prior to the storytelling, however, and despite the need for Gabriel's HIV to be discussed, he finds that it is difficult to do so, suggesting that there is something inherently catalyzing and healing in the process of storytelling.

Gabriel bemoans the fact that the virus has ruined his “natural immunities” (293), implying that the HIV virus is somehow unnatural, or foreign—a characterization that reflects the contemporary understanding of HIV as a virus originating elsewhere. Similarly, when Gabriel talks about “the virus in his bloodstream” (293), he separates his body and blood from the invasive and foreign virus. Susan Sontag writes that “disease is seen as an *invasion of alien organisms*, to which the body responds by its own military operations such as the mobilizing of immunological 'defenses’” (97; my emphasis). Like representations of the plague, HIV is strongly associated with a foreign presence: it comes from *somewhere else*, a fixation reflected in the truly bizarre array of HIV origin myths, and Gabriel's characterization of the disease as a foreign presence reflects this—the virus is *in* “his bloodstream,” not part of it. Sontag articulates the foreign vision of HIV/AIDS by writing about “the way particularly dreaded disease are envisaged as an alien 'other,' as enemies are in a modern war” (99). Understanding HIV as a symbol of a malevolent outsider has ties to the long history that Canadian Aboriginal communities have with non-native diseases such as smallpox—which, like HIV, came from somewhere else.

After a dance performance, “Gabriel [sat] sucking at the nozzle of respirator. The reason? *Pneumocystis carinii* protozoa were filling up the air sacs of his lungs one by one, choking them to death” (294-95). The protozoa are characterized as suffocating Gabriel to death, an image implying that Gabriel's restricted speech (through the reduced ability to breathe) is closely tied to his death—and that both his silence and his death are linked back to the earlier experiences of colonialism, to the encounter with a foreign culture that abused and marginalized him. Highway's characterization of the virus connects Gabriel's immediate experience back to his childhood history of being ripped

from a familiar and safe setting on the reservation and taken by foreign people to an alien environment, where he was horribly abused.

In the process of thinking through HIV, Gabriel uses personal and cultural stories to help understand what is happening to him. As he waits for final rites from Ann-Adele Ghost rider in the hospital, Gabriel transposes himself into one of his family's most storied myths: he takes the place of his father, winning the dogsled race, dreaming that "Mush!" was the only word left that could feed them, dogs and master both, with the will to travel on" (303). In doing so, Gabriel bring his childhood memories into his infected present, setting the precedent for reading HIV as reflecting on the entirety of his life. Near death, Gabriel reacts to a hallucination (or dream-vision) of the Weetigo, a cannibal spirit in Cree story, by referencing the way his speech has been impaired; crying "haven't you [the Weetigo] feasted on enough human flesh while we sit here with nothing but our tongues to chew on?" (299), Gabriel once again reinforces the connection between HIV, speech, and colonial exploitation. Just as the personal myth of the Fur Queen integrates HIV into Gabriel's own history, the Weetigo is a figure used to discuss how abuse cycles through the brother's lives. Elsewhere in the text, the figure of the Weetigo is associated with different colonial figures—most notably the predatory head priest who raped both boys while they were at Birch Tree residential school (Fagan 217)<sup>6</sup>.

The connections critics see between the spiritual figure of the Weetigo and the rhetorical construction of colonial figures in the text links HIV and the Weetigo with colonialism, implying that all three figures in some way obstruct Gabriel's ability to freely exist as a Cree man and develop a positive relationship with his identity. Kristina Fagan describes the Weetigo as

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6 See also McKegney "Trickster Poetics" 92; McKegney "Claiming Native Narrative Control" 70; Sugars 74

once-human creature[s] who, after being 'infected' with a Weetigo spirit, have an insatiable hunger and an ability to turn other humans into Weetigos. Highway uses allusions to this figure to explore the cycle of abuse, particularly in relation to the character of Gabriel. (217)

And indeed, as Fagan comments, the brothers do participate for a time in behaviours abusive both to themselves and to others, reinscribing their own Weetigo-like qualities even as they fight against them. HIV eventually functions as both a marker of the consequences of these behaviours (for Gabriel, most obviously, but also for Jeremiah in less fatal ways) and as a catalyst for cultural reconciliation with their pasts. Fagan's use of the word "infected" to describe the figure Weetigo as a comment on cyclical abuse resonates with the later construction of HIV: Gabriel's infection is a result of behaviours emergent from the trauma and abuse he has experienced at the hands of hegemonic figures of colonialism. The abusive and marginalizing experiences that accompanied the attempts to "assimilate" the Okimasis brothers have "infected" the two brothers with a kind of self-denial and Weetigo-like abusive tendencies in a way that mirrors the final literal infection of Gabriel's body with the HIV virus. Cynthia Sugars writes that "as a man-turned-monster, the weetigo might also represent a critical after-effect of colonialism, for it embodies the ways members of a culture can be induced to turn on their own people" (74). HIV can be understood in a similar way: a colonially-identified disease, HIV is communicated through *contact*, and once someone is infected their bodies turn against them. Beyond this, the stigmas that follow representations of HIV show how negative—perhaps Weetigo-like—attitudes can "infect" a culture just like a virus or a cannibal spirit.

By connecting the virus with both longer narratives of abuse and the re-



perpetuation of these abuses, Highway re-contextualizes both the virus and the stories of abuse. Situating HIV in this way insists that the virus be understood through a lens highlighting the disease's social and cultural aspects. Not only does HIV reflect back onto the abusive histories of the two brothers, thus situating HIV as a nexus from which to speak about and understand their experiences, but those histories in turn project onto the HIV, compelling the reader to see the complex relationship between the virus in Gabriel's bloodstream and the conditions in his life that may have led him towards infection. By doing so, Highway's text speaks outside of the boundaries of his fictionalized world: as a trope with a storied history that transcends the fictive/true binary, HIV is re-storied in the text to comment on the social realities of HIV/AIDS.

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* re-stories HIV as part of a larger tale of colonial exploitation, and in doing so contributes to the expansion of Cree narrative memory. As Macleod writes, traditionally Cree stories “were offered as traces of experience through which the listeners had to make sense of their own lives and understandings” (13). *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is reinterpretation of a kind of traditional Cree story, the Son of Ayash myth (McKegney). Sam McKegney argues that in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

the central question of the novel becomes: how does one separated by experience and geography from the tribal community into which he was born, yet incompletely assimilated into the dominant culture by which he is beset by racism and economic oppression, realize an identity that is at once politically empowered, culturally endorsed, and relevant to the contemporary situation in which he finds himself? Highway's answer is: through the art of storytelling, an art influenced for the novel's protagonist and its author by indigenous and Euro-Canadian cultural implements” (69)

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* stories HIV in such a way that the virus is understandable in larger Cree narratives and culture, allowing the storytelling itself to do the work of instigating discussion and raising cultural awareness. Beyond this, Highway's hybridization of Cree tradition with Eurocentric narratives models (in the novel) situates the novel as drawing from both Aboriginal and colonial culture, a discursive move that reflects the influence of both cultures in the Jeremiah and Gabriel's lives. The healing act of storytelling in the novel suggests that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* could have such effects outside of its fictional world; that the story of Jeremiah and Gabriel could impact lived experiences of HIV, abuse, and discrimination. HIV, in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, cannot be read in the disconnected and judgmental way it is often read in contemporary society; rather, Highway re-situates HIV into a more appropriate contextual narrative, and by publicly storying this narrative he gestures towards a public acceptance of the realities of HIV/AIDS infection.

Highway's re-articulation of what it means to have HIV/AIDS becomes important not only for the subject matter, but for the actual act of telling the story itself, as the storytelling engages in the process of creating Cree narrative memory. Richard Lane, in arguing for the understanding of Aboriginal writing as sacred text, argues that “contemporary Canadian First Nations writing does not partake of an alienating written culture divorced from the oral past; instead, contemporary Canadian First Nations writing has a 'scriptural function'” (198). If *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is examined with Lane's and MacLeod's arguments in mind, the novel becomes a story with social and cultural implications that transcends its fictional world. Highway's decision to narrate the particular things that he does can be understood, in fact, as a spiritual and historiographical act.

HIV is a definitively contemporary disease. The virus appeared at a time when, as Paula Treichler argues, the scientific community had developed to a point where “basic scientific research in molecular biology, virology, and immunology could provide a foundation for an intensive research effort focused on AIDS. [. . .] no other epidemic disease has been analyzed so quickly or had its cause so effectively determined” (2). Yet despite its contemporary nature, HIV has connections with other historical epidemics, most notably the plague (Sontag)<sup>7</sup>. For Jeremiah and Gabriel, the appearance of HIV extends their own individual narratives backwards into the longer history of colonial oppression while firmly rooting them in contemporary existence. The presence of this particular virus marks their experience with the present (in the contemporary situation of a person dying from HIV/AIDS), but the implications of a Cree person dying from a foreign epidemic has connotations that reach back to colonial histories of other epidemics, some of which (like smallpox) were deliberately employed as weapons against Aboriginal people. The sociocultural implications of Highway writing his text in this way participates in the extra-textual social engagement of which Lane and Macleod speak. Highway creates a new narrative of epidemic in Aboriginal communities, expanding the larger cultural narrative of exploitation to include HIV.

Tensions between the past and the present are so omnipresent in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* that they are almost a structuring force in the text. The Okimasis brothers constantly try to negotiate their contemporary lived realities with their childhood memories, with the world of their parents, and with the echoes of the colonial past of their older relatives, a past of which Amanda Clearsky desperately tries to remind

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<sup>7</sup> In an early and particularly offensive understanding of the virus, for instance, HIV/AIDS was sometimes referred to as the 'gay plague' (“History of AIDs Up to 1985”).

Jeremiah. “There were many bloody periods in human history [. . .] many of them occurring right here in North America,” Amanda asserts (148). Amanda references “the Cherokee Trail of Tears [. . .] Wounded Knee, smallpox blankets, any number of atrocities done to Indian people” (148) Her mention of the smallpox blankets occurs long before HIV appears in the text, and her vocal reminder of the smallpox blankets quietly sets up a textual precedent for the later appearance of HIV. “Many of them *occurring* right here” (148; my emphasis), Amanda says, and her choice of a present tense verb signifies the continued significance of contagious disease in Aboriginal communities.

There are other hints at Gabriel's later infection, beyond his high risk sexual practices: after an orgy, Gabriel notices that “everywhere he looked, naked limb met naked limb, an unceasing domino effect of human flesh, smell, fluid. Whisky, beer, wine swirled, *splashed like blood*, smoke from marijuana rose like incense” (168; my emphasis). Gabriel's body “was eaten, tongues writhing serpent-like around his own, breath mingling with his, his orifices punctured and repunctured, *as with nails*” (168-69; my emphasis). In the aftermath of one of his first (adult) sexual experiences, images of Christianity mingle with those of blood and invasion: Gabriel is eaten, punctured (an image that calls to mind needles as well as nails), and consumed in an environment where thoughts of blood mix with the alcohol. The mix of alcohol, blood, and images of Christianity recalls the exploitative history of such things vis-a-vis Aboriginal communities, and foreshadows the blood-transmitted HIV later in the text. While HIV is not explicitly written about in these scenes, the connections Highway draws between epidemics, colonialism, and Aboriginal existence frames the appearance of the HIV virus such that it is understood as inseparable from the narrative of colonial abuse that is so important throughout the text.

While HIV may *include* the brothers in the history of disease and colonial oppression, the contemporary nature of the virus prevents it from reductive binaries of pre- and post- colonial contact discussions<sup>8</sup>. In a similarly liminal way, HIV in the text both resists the problematic urge to return to a pre-contact past and the push to assimilate: HIV marks Gabriel's body with his past, making it impossible to ignore the impact of his experiences. If writing HIV in the localized context of the novel draws connections between the virus and the individual histories of abuse that preceded it, another connection that narrating HIV makes is between the localized stories of Gabriel and Jeremiah Okimasis and a longer historical framework of colonial exploitation, one that extends beyond their immediate personal experiences into a collective history.

In the penultimate scene, Gabriel dies amidst an elaborate scenario where differing ideological tensions clash. In a sense, Gabriel's death from HIV forces the past and present to coexist in much the same way that the virus makes links narratively, placing the past and the present in dialogue with one another. Inside Gabriel's room, the Ojibway medicine woman Ann-Adele Ghostrider hangs Mariesis's rosary “on a Ken doll sporting cowboy hat and white-tasselled skirt. [. . .] [she] lit a braid of sweetgrass and washed the patient in its smoke” (Highway 303), all of which takes place under the watchful eye of “the Fur Queen portrait” (Highway 303). Cree, Ojibway, and Christian spiritualities mix, all the while underneath the Okimasis family's personal symbol of the Trickster<sup>9</sup>. As Ann-Adele performs the last rites, “the scream of fire alarms and engines

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8 Sam McKegney compellingly argues that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* resists the patterns that many residential school stories fall into, as it “acquiesces neither to the colonial storyline of inevitable assimilation [. . .] nor the postcolonial storyline of inevitable victimhood crafted through revisionist history” (82).

9 Highway explains that the trickster figure is present in many North American Aboriginal spiritualities and is “a comic, clownish sort of character [whose] [. . .] role is to teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth” (“A

became a woman's wail, then another, then another, until one hundred voices were wailing the death chant” (305). In the midst of this chaos, a kind of spiritual reconciliation finally occurs, as “through the smoke and candle light, the Fur Queen swept into the room. Covering the bed with her cape, she leaned to Gabriel's cheek” (306).

Sam McKegney argues that “*Kiss of the Fur Queen* enacts a significant imaginative intervention into a discursive environment dominated by simulations designed to 'fix' residential school experiences in the realm of an historical discourse which maintains a non-Native authority” (“From Trickster Poetics” 83). Part of this “imaginative intervention” relates to the extension of Aboriginal histories with European diseases to HIV, an extension that not only demonstrates the continued colonial exploitation by the Western figures in the novel, but also re-situates the Aboriginal characters as the original inhabitants of the land. If, as Sontag argues, HIV is nearly always understood as a foreign or alien disease, and connected in *Fur Queen* to the figures of colonial authority, then those characters associated with hegemonic colonial powers are situated as invaders, reinscribing the connection characters like Gabriel and Jeremiah feel to the land around them. So to speak, if HIV is a foreign virus, and HIV and colonialism are closely linked, then the association of colonialism with HIV implies that figures of colonial authority are disconnected from the actual place in contrast to anti-colonial figures. HIV, however, is a force that does not allow the characters to easily return to their homes; in fact, HIV and the abuses that the brothers endure entirely prevent the changeless return to their lives on the reserve<sup>10</sup>. HIV thus effects a reconciliation between different stories in multiple ways: in the text, as a metaphor; in

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Note on the Trickster”).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Erin Wunker for this observation

Gabriel's infected body and multi-voiced death; and spatially, reaffirming the brother's connection to their home while still marking the difference in their lives.

In these ways, HIV ruptures the lives of Jeremiah and Gabriel. While only one brother is actually *infected* with HIV, Jeremiah “lives” with the disease in a different way, as he works through the realities of his brother's infection and the tragedy of Gabriel's eventual death. For both of the brothers, the virus epitomizes the dramatic shift in their life that prevented them from returning unchanged to the reserve; the effects of their abusive experiences in the hegemonic colonial system, and these changes must (the novel suggests) be incorporated into whatever form their new lives takes (McKegney). HIV, for the two brothers, troubles the boundaries that structure their lives, and the life of the novel itself. Both Jeremiah and Gabriel negotiate, through the emotional and spiritual catalyst that eventually accompanies Gabriel's death from AIDS, their lived realities that transcend boundaries. In other words, avoiding the “return” vision of restitution (Lane 194) allows the brothers to have a more nuanced experience of coming to terms with their selves.

The foundation of all of the different connections that HIV forges—between the individual histories of abuse in the brother's lives, and between longer narratives that include both past and present existences—is storytelling, with all of the many connotations that storytelling may have. The act of storytelling itself can be read in a number of different, but equally important ways in the text. Kristina Fagan makes a persuasive argument for the interpretation of storytelling as one form of a more culturally appropriate response to trauma, drawing from a number of anthropological studies that suggest that in an Aboriginal context, “witnessing may [not only] be difficult, [. . .] it may be seen as ethically wrong if it is destructive to community harmony” (209). Fagan

contends that

writers use storytelling to explore connections between the traumatic past and troubles in the present and to self-reflexively examine the potential and limits of such indirect and humorous communication [ . . . ] these novels use storytelling to create 'Aboriginal trauma theory'" (204-05).

Rupert Ross's *Dancing With a Ghost* explores the social stigma within many North American Aboriginal communities against speaking directly, and Ross's experience in the legal system leads him to make several persuasive observations about the ways in which the Western judicial system comes into conflict with the lived realities of Aboriginal communities. Ross details how the confrontational, accusatory nature of the Eurocentric justice system often conflicts with values held by Aboriginal communities, and he calls for a more sensitive approach to be developed. Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* can be read (as Fagan reads it) as an example of a more culturally appropriate trauma theory—indeed, Fagan goes on to argue that “Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* [ . . . ] uses Cree storytelling to create a culturally grounded trauma theory that connects the character's past abuse to their adult lives” (211). As I have been arguing, HIV is a trope that connects the past and present abuses of the Okimasis brothers in ways that encompass both their individual histories and the collective history of Aboriginal people in Canada vis-a-vis the colonial hegemony. The act of writing HIV in this text, therefore, is not only the re-contextualizing of HIV into a more nuanced and historicized narrative of abuse, as I have already mentioned, but a way of witnessing the devastation that HIV has wrought in Aboriginal communities across Canada. As I mentioned in my introduction, the Canadian Aboriginal population is dramatically overrepresented in HIV statistics, more so than any other self-identified group. If, as Neal Macleod writes,



“stories act as the vehicles of cultural transmission by linking one generation to the next” (68), then *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is a vehicle that links the different exploitations of generations of Aboriginal people together, using HIV as an effective lynchpin for the entire discussion.

Macleod also argues that

there are many levels to the stories [of Cree narrative], and many functions to them: they link the past to the present and allow the possibility of cultural transmission, and of coming home in an ideological sense. Our [Cree people's] contemporary task is to retrieve tribal narrative and paradigms and to reaffirm our identities in the face of the overwhelming pressure of exile and colonialism (68).

Macleod's discussion of storying is analagous to how Highway tells his story, which sees a healing aspect as well as a narrativizing aspect to *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. It is not HIV specifically that causes a reckoning with the traumatic memories of the Okimasis brothers, but rather the interrelated web of influences linked to HIV in the text—a network of meaning of which HIV is a symptom rather than a root cause. To narrativize HIV in the way that Highway does is to story a whole host of other associated traumatic experiences. In the text's healing capacity, as a public act of storytelling, the healing that Macleod discusses is relevant not only to the particular context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but also to the range of abuses that come alongside HIV. The two things—HIV and the social realities of the virus—cannot be separated, as the complex web of stigma that surrounds HIV conditions not only the understanding of the virus, but also the way that the things associated with the virus are read.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Tomson Highway uses HIV to talk about the multiplicity of ways that systematic abuses intersect and feed off of one another, and the

ways that these abuses are historically and culturally situated. By *telling* this narrative of an HIV-positive Cree man, Highway engages in an ostensive act that layers the lived realities of the virus, which are affected by the public storytelling and narrativizing of this experience, onto a fluid and shifting map of the rhetorical significance of HIV as a meaning-laden virus. While much of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* does not directly deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Highway uses the virus (and its many associated stigmas) to centre his discussions of abuse both individual and historical.

The end of the text, however, resists a wholly hopeful interpretation. While Gabriel does not die in a completely hopeless way—as the figure of Weesageechak in his/her Fur Queen guise appears and kisses him “only for a moment, though [Gabriel] wanted it to last a thousand years” (306)—Gabriel does still die. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* does not suggest that there is an untouched path out of the cyclical abuse that surrounds Gabriel's infection (Fagan), but neither does the text reject the possibility that reconciliation is possible. Instead, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* presents a middle-ground view, cautiously suggesting that through the careful use of art and storytelling it may be possible to intervene in the cycles of abuse (McKegney 103). Gabriel does not heal from the virus, but the presence of the Fur Queen at his death suggests that he was able to overcome the psychological trauma of the virus, and of the many factors that led him to the virus.

In telling the story of the Okimasis brothers, Highway gestures towards a public re-understanding of the meanings of HIV, and the ways that HIV is both contextualized and culturally understood. As Neal Macleod writes

collective memory is the echo of old stories that links grandparents with their grandchildren. In the Cree tradition, collective narrative memory is what puts our

singular lives into a larger context. Old voices echo, the ancient poetic memory of our ancestors finds home in our individual lives and allows us to reshape our experience so that we can interpret the world we find ourselves in (11).

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* adds to this collective voice through a culturally appropriate method of dealing with trauma: the narrativizing of HIV, in relation to the many social realities that accompany it, helps the characters (to use Macleod) not only to understand their individual lives, but also to put their own experiences of abuse and suffering into the larger context of “collective narrative memory.” The connections that HIV makes among many different and often conflicting stories in *Highway* often link these different narratives in ways that illuminate previously unseen ties. Jo-Ann Episkenew writes that

Indigenous literature respond[s] to and critique[s] the policies of the government of Canada; it also functions as 'medicine' to help cure the colonial contagion by healing the communities that these policies have injured. [ . . . ] Indigenous literatures acknowledges and validates Indigenous peoples' experiences by filling in the gaps and connecting the falsehoods in this master narrative (2)

*Highway's Kiss of the Fur Queen* participates in this kind of healing-focused critique. The narrative journey of Jeremiah and Gabriel not only speaks to the importance of telling these narratives in order to better understand the situations that may push people towards behaviour that endangers them, but also so that HIV may be understood as yet another instance of colonial exploitation in what has been a long and painful history. While the Okimasis brothers should not, I feel, be read metonymically as representative of their whole community, the act of telling their story is a way of highlighting the importance of listening to and incorporating the vast plurality of contemporary Aboriginal existence into the framework of Cree narrative memory.

## Chapter 3: The Long Road Back

### HIV and Homecoming in Jordan Wheeler & Beth Brandt

*Writing is an act of courage for most. For us, it is an act that required opening up our wounded communities, our families, to eyes and ears that do not love us. Is this madness?*

*-Beth Brandt*

In the early days of HIV/AIDS, a positive diagnosis was so linked to death that the two were almost synonymous. Writing about HIV in such a fear-ridden environment was a way to resist the erasure death threatened by creating a literary record of one's existence. Jason Tougaw wrote of AIDS memoirs published in the 1980s and 1990s that often the texts were “written as alternatives to silence, to combat the terrifying effects of the epidemic. As testimonies, these memoirs are engaged in the autobiographical act of bearing witness to a collective trauma” (167). Writing an AIDS memoir during the grief-stricken earlier years of HIV/AIDS, Tougaw argues, was a way of bearing witness to the death and horror of the AIDS epidemic, ensuring that the stories of HIV positive people were preserved. Although HIV does not carry the fatal implications it once did, the connection between HIV and death continues to be expressed through HIV/AIDS literature, where the texts that describe life with HIV memorialize those living with the virus.

By the early twenty-first century, being HIV-positive does not have to have the terrifying implications that it once did, but too often the better drug treatments and testing facilities that improve and extend life with HIV are only functionally available to relatively affluent people with the appropriate support networks. In my own work at AIDS Saskatoon from 2007 to 2010, I observed that being HIV positive was not always

the most pressing concern for the people who accessed services: when HIV is vying for attention alongside factors that may include poverty, addiction, institutionalized discrimination, and (importantly) homelessness, the virus does not always have the same attention-grabbing power it may have in other situations. As such, the urge to narrate HIV exists alongside competing stories of other social determinants of health. In particular, the prevalence of homelessness for contemporary Aboriginal peoples in Canada lends poignancy to the repeated trope of homecoming in Aboriginal literature. Considering the importance of homelessness as a social issue for Canada's Aboriginal peoples, it is not surprise that homecoming is a recurrent plot in many texts that deal with HIV/AIDS as well. Nancy van Styvendale has noted the frequency of homecoming stories, and has theorized an entire genre of “recovery narratives” around them. These narratives generally depict characters returning home in search of the “origin of [ . . . ] indigenous identity—to authenticity” (1), as Van Styvendale writes of Richard Wagamese's *Keeper N Me*. However, recovery narratives also show the impossibility of such a return, as experiences of loss reveal the flaws in the impulse to return unchanged. Recovery narratives offer visions of a life prior to experiences of discrimination and abuse, but simultaneously complicate these visions by revealing their mythic quality.

Van Styvendale provisionally structures a difference between “classic” and “counter” recovery narratives, one that is helpful when discussing the differences between Brandt's and Wheeler's stories:

classic recovery narratives subscribe strongly to the notion of recovery's possibility, outlining a program for healing from displacement through homecoming, while counter recovery narratives, self consciously aware of the genre's features and assumption, overtly attempt to problematize the possibility of

recovery for those who cannot or do not want to go home. (4)

The relatively optimistic tone of Brandt's text aligns it more with the 'classic' kind of recovery narrative, while the more troubled world in Wheeler's story is better read as a 'counter' narrative. While neither story fits perfectly into either of these categories, discussing the two in terms of classic and counter recovery narratives lends structure to the different ways that “This Place” and “Exposure” deal with the act of coming home. I use Van Styvendale's frameworks to ground my discussion of Brandt and Wheeler, working within her provisional definitions of “classic” and “counter” recovery narratives to explore the implications of return in each text.

Death—or, rather, the process of dying—lies behind the urge to return home for the HIV positive characters in Beth Brant's short story “This Place,” from her collection *Food & Spirits*, and in Jordan Wheeler's novella “Exposure,” from his collection *Brothers in Arms*. In both stories an HIV-positive, gay, Aboriginal man facing death returns from an urban life to the reserve communities of their childhood. In Brandt's story, David returns to his loving mother's house, where kindly (and closeted) medicine man Joseph guides David through a vision that helps him heal spiritually and prepare for death. Brandt's text layers and mixes multiple narratives, blending David's individual experience in the city with the collective Aboriginal history of colonial exploitation, and with narratives from Aboriginal spirituality. Wheeler's text is less optimistic in its representation of the return home, foregrounding instead the experiences of exclusion and abuse that Kris and his HIV-positive gay brother Martin struggle with upon their return to their rez. While homecoming in Brandt is ultimately allows for a psychologically and spiritually healing return, Wheeler's narrative focusses on the ways that the reserve community ostracizes and rejects Martin for most of the story, denying him everything

from the band funds required to rebuild his father's house to treatment at the reserve clinic. Reading the two authors together demonstrates the plural nature of such stories and their lives: Wheeler and Brandt come from different First Nations backgrounds and lives, and their stories read together resist a totalizing narrative of “homecoming” for Aboriginal people. Wheeler and Brandt explore their character's sexuality and the different ways their respective communities react: while Brandt's David is accepted by Ruby, his mother, and embraced by the covertly gay medicine man Joseph, Wheeler's Martin spends most of the text ostracized from his mother, and indeed from his whole community. Both authors discuss the role of homophobia in Aboriginal communities, using metaphors of contagion to articulate both how colonial views of sexuality infect the community and how colonial viruses infect the body.

Van Styvendale argues that the problematic attempt to return home facilitates a “recovery process” through which “one heals from loss, recovery's naturalized opposite” (10). In different ways, both Brandt and Wheeler explore what possibilities the future holds for the integration of HIV/AIDS into the cultural and social narrative frameworks of Aboriginal communities, particularly those on the rez. The characters in Brandt and Wheeler are certainly hoping for a recovery that will counter loss— but in a spiritual and emotional sense, as the inevitable drive of both stories is towards death. Even as the stories are filled with loss of life, the recovery narratives of Brandt and Wheeler counter the loss of story that leads to silence, instead inserting HIV into the lacunae in cultural narratives of disease, inciting discussion instead of oppressive silence.

Focussing on the return home as opposed to the life in the city or the process of leaving throws the past and present sharply into conflict, as the return home often involves dealing with old memories. Mark Shackleton writes that “coming home through

stories [in an Aboriginal context] helps counteract a sense of fragmentation and isolation” (158), and Brandt and Wheeler use their stories to work through this process of 'coming home' to create community in and around their stories. In Brandt and Wheeler the complexities of returning home in the context of HIV/AIDS exemplify the boundary crossing/making dichotomy of HIV: while the virus compels the characters to return to their childhood homes, the impact of HIV/AIDS as a cultural phenomena reveals stigmas in home communities that mediate the ability of different characters to go home.

The stigmas surrounding HIV/AIDS are highlighted in the text through the presence of homophobia within Aboriginal communities. While “two-spirit people have traditionally respected roles within most Aboriginal cultures and societies and are contributing members of the community” (CAAN)<sup>11</sup>, Aboriginal communities have been affected by the prejudicial attitudes of colonial culture. For example, Gilbert Deschamps finds that many two-spirited people “have been forced to leave their home communities due to intolerance of sexual diversity and, in many cases, at very young ages” (26). The fictional stories of David and Martin draw attention to real-life experiences of alienation and homophobia in Aboriginal communities. The very presence of homophobic reactions in the texts speaks to a tension between past and present that is key to the homecoming stories—the historical acceptance of two-spirit people clashes with contemporary stigmas, mirroring the persona past/present tension implicit in the very impulse of the recovery narrative (Van Styvendale). The discrimination felt by David and Martin within their communities is both toxic and historically based, revealing the profound changes to paradigms in Aboriginal communities that have resulted from colonialism. “In a world that does not honour indigenous people,” writes Deschamps, “two-spirited people suffer

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<sup>11</sup> More detailed descriptions of the history of the term “two spirit” and the contemporary experiences of two-spirit people can be found in: Lehavot et al. & Balsam et al.



'triple oppression'—as Natives, as homosexuals, and in the case of two-spirited lesbians, as women” (27). The “limited support and acceptance for two-spirit people in many Aboriginal communities” (CAAN) is apparent in the narratives of Martin and David, both of whom discuss feelings of alienation and oppression that eventually prompted them to leave the rez for the city, in search of a chance to live their lives more freely.

While this tension between past and present is, as Van Styvendale points out, representative of many understandings of temporality in Aboriginal culture, HIV/AIDS is firmly rooted in the present. While “in the context of systemic displacement, recovery narratives can be understood, as a nationalist project, to recuperate the importance of the rural/reserve as ancestral land” (Van Styvendale 14), incorporating HIV/AIDS into these narratives raises concerns about and within the communities to which characters seek to return. HIV is contagious in multiple ways, and it threatens communities as well as the individual body. When David and Martin attempt to return home, their desire to re-establish themselves on the reserve is seen as a threat. The infected bodies of the two men become representative of the threats themselves, and the attempt to exclude them is simultaneously an attempt to control the virus and quarantine what the characters represent; Martin especially is seen as a kind of “carrier” of both HIV and unwanted social issues, as shown in the graffiti sprayed on Martin's house: “FAGS GO HOME” (202). The message is clear: Martin is not welcome to feel at “home” on the reserve, but must instead belong elsewhere. At the same time, it is not “Martin” that is rejected, but the stereotype associated with him—Martin is seen as metonymically representing the incursion of these forces into the reserve community, as it is “fags” in general rather than Martin in particular to whom the community reacts.

In different ways, Brandt and Wheeler interrogate the meaning of returning home,

particularly when homecoming includes HIV, homosexuality, and Aboriginal identity. As a disease characterized as being from “somewhere else” (Sontag), HIV's presence links the characters of David and Martin back to their homes by emphasizing the foreign, colonial presence that has infected their lives, thus reminding readers of the colonial history of infectious diseases in Aboriginal communities. As a virus rooted in the present, however, HIV problematizes this attempt to return to a safe home by complicating the dynamics of this return in both the individual and the home community.

Beth Brandt's story “This Place” is text is hopeful in tone, despite the relatively hopeless situation of her protagonist, David, who has returned home to the reserve to die in his mother's care. The textual world of the reserve in “This Place” is limited: the only characters are David, his mother, the medicine man Joseph, and Joseph's somewhat extraordinary cat, Prophet. Aided by Joseph, who facilitates a healing vision for him, David's initial fear of death is resolved and he brings together previously conflicting sides of his identity.

Wendy Pearson comments on the way that “David's fear [of AIDS and death] is a very contemporary one” (169), a fear that

the 'virus eating away at this place' [. . .] is a reminder of the historical consequences of colonialism for native peoples, an evocation of a history in which viruses did indeed 'wipe out his people by breathing, by talking, by living' and in which 'this place,' the place of native belonging, was incurably infected by Europeans (169).

David makes sense of the HIV in his body using military metaphors reminiscent of those identified in public discourse by Sontag: David

could feel the virus changing his body, marking marks on his insides. Outside,

too, his body was marked: by the tumors growing on his face and the paleness of this skin [. . .] He could feel the virus at war with the melanin and he could not check the battle. He couldn't hold this virus in his fist and squeeze the death out of it. He could only wait and look in the mirror to see the casualty of this war (49-50).

Contagion is here represented as invasion—or, more particularly, as colonialism. The virus's progression through his body mimics the colonialism that surrounds him, a battle in which David is a “casualty of this war”. In “This Place,” HIV is often figured as a vehicle for or representative of colonial authority, and the path the virus takes through David's body “colonizes” him in a way reminiscent of the colonialization of his whole community. Pearson writes of “This Place” that

David's story calls into view a reverse discourse of infection that serves to remind the reader that native bodies, native spirituality, and native understandings of gender and sexuality have all been contaminated by the trade goods of European colonialism, by the effects not only of European guns but of the noxious imports (172).

The virus makes “marks on his insides,” speaking to the psychological import of colonial practices. Perhaps in response to this, David worries that the virus is assimilating him to Western culture against his will, by “bleaching the melanin that turned him polished copper in the summer and left him light terra cotta in winter” (49). The combined physical and psychological impact of HIV leads David to feel that he is a “carrier” for colonialism as well as the virus: David is afraid that the HIV in his body, just like the colonial influence in his life and community, is a risk to the people around him, as “the virus put a fear in him—a fear that he could wipe out his people by breathing, by talking,

by living” (50). David uses contagion to connect the noxious effects of colonialism with HIV, fearing that “exposure” to him could be dangerous in more than viral ways. The way David frames HIV and colonialism within the same language of contagion thus reinforces the implied connection between the two. HIV, as representative of a colonial threat, causes David to see “in his dreams, the virus eating away at this place until it was gone” (50).

Van Styvendale writes that “recovery narratives of all literary types are united by a fundamental concern with land and the relationship between place and indigenous identity” (42), a connection that structures much of “This Place” and is reflected in David's anxiety about HIV/colonialism “eating away at this place” (50) and in his desire to return to the reservation. Place, and the different ways that David connects to place, is of continued interest throughout the story. The rez is not the only place in the text that is given significant attention—David consistently expresses uncertainty about the movement between city and reserve and how his identity is most fully expressed in both places. The reserve remains a place to which David feels very connected, but his positive experiences in the city resist the construction of a good reserve/bad city dichotomy. Brandt's text explores the limitations that David faced on the reserve, and how life off the rez allowed him to transcend some of those boundaries. David feels tied to the reserve—as Joseph says to him, “you're just a rez boy, ain't you? Nothing looks as good as here, eh?” (58), but David also speaks of how the people on the reserve “don't want queers, faggots living among them” (55), and how he found acceptance in an urban gay community. David speaks of finding love and meeting his “pretty shine in the city” (60) who was the “love of [his] life” (60). However, the love that David finds in the city is not representative of his urban life, where at times he “hated being an Indian” (55). The

ambivalent environments of the city and the rez ensures that neither location is viewed as reductively good or bad, and the nuances of both communities create a more complex and realistic world for David to inhabit.

David battles the virus at home and triumphs over the psychological, if not the physical, virus. David's return is welcomed—his “sister brought her children to see him” (50) and the children “crawled on his lap and kissed him” (50). Despite this welcome, David's homecoming is bittersweet as he struggles with the tension between his identity as a gay man and his desire to assert his own Aboriginal identity. David is ultimately able to reconcile these two identities, in large part because of Joseph, whom David suddenly realizes is gay:

As David bit into the sweetness of the tart, he looked at Joseph, his earring swinging against his shoulders, his hands making patterns in the air as he described the making of the tarts, and David thought, *He acts like a queen*. He looked harder at Joseph, thinking, if you put him in a city, in a gay bar, the old nelly would fit right in. David laughed out loud. [. . .] Joseph grinned and nodded his head. 'Catchin' on, my young friend?' (53)

To Joseph, David comments that “if I'd stayed here, I wouldn't have known the world was full of gay people. If I'd stayed here though, maybe I wouldn't have gotten AIDS” (60), although when he “lived in the city, [David] used to get so homesick for this place [the reserve]” (54). David is initially unable to reconcile his identity as HIV positive with his Aboriginal self—he worries that the HIV is “taking away his color” (49), and he asks his mother if HIV is “turning [him] white” (50). During his time with Joseph, David has a vision in which memories of his first love in the city mix with narratives of Aboriginal culture and history on a broader scale. The vision ends with David's acceptance of his

imminent death and a statement of inception that signals a new beginning: “Turtle touched his heart are you ready he fell he put out his arms he held out his arms I am ready they touched him I am ready I am ready I am ready” (65).

For David, the act of homecoming brings up the circumstances that caused him to leave. As I have discussed previously, talking and writing HIV always employs a layered vocabulary, where the virus and its associated stigmas discursively co-exist. HIV/AIDS is linked both to the past, particularly in relationship to the plague, and to the present—a point which Susan Sontag persuasively makes in her seminal text *AIDS and its Metaphors*. HIV, argues Sontag, is a definitively contemporary virus, replete with anxieties about globalization, so-called “deviant” sexualities, and general fears about vulnerability. David's desire to explore his identity as a gay man that caused him to leave the reserve, where his sexuality was not tolerated. His HIV is given ambiguous cause in the text: while it is implied that he contacted the disease through his sexual life in the city, it is equally suggested that the intolerance that prompted David to leave the rez for urbanity is, indirectly, also to blame. In this way, the fact of David's HIV both implicates and acquits the colonially influenced reserve community in David's illness.

In “This Place” David's individual story and infection resonates with other experiences on the reserve community as he and Joseph speak about their lives as gay Aboriginal men living on and off reserve. Joseph tells David that he never left the reserve for the city because he felt he “had to stay. It was [his] job” (58), whereas David “thought [he] had to make the choice [to stay or leave] and don't know what would have happened if [he] hadn't left” (60). Both Joseph and David have experienced homophobia on the reserve and as a result have either hidden their gay identity or left in order to express it. Throughout Brandt's story, homecoming is constructed as a process of healing and of

acknowledgement: while David left the reserve to find out that “the world was full of gay people” (60), he returns home only to realize that he was never the only gay man on the reserve. Pearson sees a reconciliation in “This Place”:

David's story [. . .] thus brings together both the physical and the discursive effects of two epidemics whose histories may appear to some to have little in common. David's body, David's spirit, made whole (but not 'cured') with the story, suggests that the possibility of reconciliation of both paths of David's identity of the recognition by his family and by the medicine man, Joseph (himself a two-spirit) that it is indeed possible to 'both gay [and] be an Indian' (170).

The two worlds David was unable to connect were always in closer proximity than he had thought, and his return home repeatedly demonstrates how intimately connected his different selves have always been.

The relationship between homecoming and HIV in the story speaks to Van Styvendale's observations about how “home in an indigenous context signifies widely: it is not only a particular geographic location, but a set of reciprocal relations shaped by the land and forged between multiple life forms and persons, both human and non” (22). For David, the tension he feels about the different experiences of home he has had both on the reserve and in the city are also between the different communities of people that accepted or rejected him in those different places. David's return to the reserve is characterized by acceptance and the kind of healing that Van Styvendale sees in “classic” recovery narratives, although this homecoming and healing is mediated by the presence and meaning of David's HIV.

In Jordan Wheeler's novella “Exposure,” the return home is filled with rejection and anger—a sharp contrast to the loving family environment into which David returns.

“Exposure” fits much more neatly into the category of “counter” recovery narratives explored by Van Styvendale, who writes that in “‘counter’ recovery narratives, there exists a characteristic tension between the desire for recovery so imagined and the problematization of this definition for its exclusionary effect” (10). The “exclusionary effect” that Van Styvendale writes about refers to the way that classic recovery narratives can suppress “other articulations of Nativeness” (13) by valourizing a single particular model of return, and that counter recovery narratives instead move towards plurality. The troubled world of Wheeler's story similarly resists homogenous articulations of identity, focussing instead on an alternative model of return Wheeler's HIV positive character Martin and his brother Kris fight the members of their own families in order to allow Martin the right to die at home. Homecoming in “Exposure” is a battle rather than a right.

Both Wheeler and Brandt tell what are ostensibly similar stories: an HIV-positive gay man returns to the reserve to die, where he finds assistance from another man and comes to terms with tensions between his identity and the reserve community. Wheeler's tale, however, deals more explicitly with the prejudices and complications of life on the reserve than does Brandt. Wheeler's text explores the extraordinary lengths to which the reserve community goes to prevent Martin's return: the house that Kris and Martin are fixing up is vandalized; the funds for the repairs are cut off; treatment and drugs at the reserve clinic are denied to Martin; and Martin is even savagely beaten, despite already being extremely ill. Initially, Martin's cousin Frank appears to be helpful, but his sympathy quickly proves false. Wheelers' text, with its elements of inter-familial anger and rejection, challenges the viability of the classic recovery narrative by questioning the validity of representing 'home' as a safe, unchanged space. When Martin tells his Aunt Peggy Jane that he has “come back, Auntie, because [he] want[s] to die on the reserve”



(168), she is suspicious, remarking with surprise that “this [the reserve] is what people choose for death” (168), and warning Martin that “the reserve ain't like it used to be” (168). Indeed, Martin's mother Ruby outright rejects her son for much of the text. Martin's own Aboriginal identity is not wholly congruent with the one recognized by members of the reserve community, most of whom try to suppress Martin's identity by forcing him off the reserve—off the land from which Martin derives an important part of his identity.

Wheeler deconstructs the idea of “home” in order to explore “homecoming” in the Aboriginal context of HIV/AIDS. Van Styvendale writes of the “loss” that exists in all recovery narratives: in order for someone to leave, there was at one point a loss or negative experience that instigated the initial flight from home. She writes that “the wound that exists at the heart of home, and the loss that haunts and informs home's construction is an ideological feature of the recovery narrative genre” (25), a comment that speaks well to the troubled home to which Kris and Martin attempt to return. At every turn, Kris and Martin are reminded of the intolerance that influenced their initial departure. The “loss” of which Van Styvendale writes is constantly reiterated in the prejudicial attitudes that Kris and Martin face on their reserve. Frank, Kris and Martin's cousin who works on the band council, asserts that “people are scared of this AIDS thing” (195), but it is more than just fear of the virus—Ruby, their estranged mother, has a huge amount of difficulty accepting both her son's sexuality and his illness, stubbornly insisting that “whatever has happened to Martin is his own doing. It's his comeuppance for the way he's lived” (198). This victim-blaming is pervasive throughout the negativity on the rez, and is in fact reflective of dominant Eurocentric opinions about the disease, as explored in my introduction. This kind of prejudice extends beyond their family—the

brothers return home one night to find “spray painted across the entire front of the house in green and silver [. . .] the words, FAGS GO HOME” (202). For the characters in “Exposure,” the negative stigmas associated with HIV cause community members to reject Martin for the majority of the text. Wheeler uses the social implications of the HIV virus to interrogate the implications of Martin's desire to return home, using HIV to demonstrate how the reserve community has been changed in Martin's absence, and the profound difference between the accepting home Martin sought and the alienating one he has found.

The general animosity towards Martin in the reserve community makes his insistence on dying and being buried on the reserve seem curious—after all, why insist on a burial when the community is rejecting and abusing you? His desire for one despite the lack of support from his family and childhood community speaks to the importance of literal, physical place to the recovery narrative. Van Styvendale highlights the continued importance of place in Aboriginal literature, perceptively commenting that to ignore the important of geographic place in recovery narratives is to ignore the continuing concerns over land rights in a Canadian Aboriginal context. Van Styvendale argues that in “recovery narratives, 'home' exists in the journey between the urban and the rural, both as the journey itself and as the indigenous counterpoint to urban displacement” (29). In the context of HIV, however, the idea of “home” is more uncertain, as demonstrated in Wheeler's text. For Martin, his HIV both draws him home, in his desire to die and be buried in a place to which he feels connected, but also bars him from it, as the stigmas about his HIV and sexuality poison the community against him and his brother—the same stigmas that once pushed him away. This push-pull created by HIV, where the virus both draws Martin home and restricts him from it, is characteristic of the liminal states

effected by HIV as a literary device.

Martin's own liminality is highlighted when he speaks of his inability to find a community that could understand what he was experiencing as an HIV positive, Aboriginal gay man. When Kris asks Martin if he received “any support from the gay community” (199), Martin responds carefully, saying that the gay community “offer[s] counselling, a buddy system and all that. Many are sincerely helpful. [. . .] But for the most part, you're not really accepted unless you pretend you're something else. Being gay is one thing, being Indian and gay is another” (200). Wheeler leaves this issue somewhat underdeveloped, suggesting through the partiality of the issue that the problem has no easy solution and cannot be neatly wrapped up in the text. Martin finds himself unable to reconcile his two identities, and his desire to be buried on the reserve can be read as an attempt to find a middle ground between his multiple selves—a way of existing on the reserve apart from the abuse. Being denied acceptance into the reserve community takes its toll, and eventually Martin's frustration explodes. After being refused treatment at the clinic, Martin is furious and in pain, crying out at the watching, silent crowd:

'I can't help what I've got [. . .] I don't want to die of this, but I can't do anything about it. I just want to die in peace, to die at home. Is that too much to ask for? Can't you let me do that?' [. . .] Martin was staring up. No one knew if he was addressing them or God. 'Can't I die in dignity?' he cried, his voice trailing off as his head fell. He sobbed. (207)

Martin's frustration speaks to the profound way Wheeler troubles homecoming's ability to heal. In the end, Martin is accepted, as “droves” of people come to his funeral and Martin's wish to be buried on the reserve is granted, but this post-mortem show of affection comes too late for Martin to reap any benefit from it.

The late acceptance of Martin does not erase the exclusion and hateful actions earlier in the narratives, actions emergent from cultural understandings of HIV as somehow representative of “deviance.” Wheeler's decision to use HIV troubles the healing potentials of returning home by revealing how HIV's rhetorical function breaks open and challenges otherwise straightforward narratives. Martin's HIV bars him from just “returning home,” erecting barriers both functional (like treatment) and sociocultural (in the stigma on the rez) to impede his recovery.

The healing that both HIV positive characters in the “This Place” and “Exposure” seek is consistently couched in relation to tradition. Just as Brandt and Wheeler present different visions of the potential of homecoming as an act of healing and recovery, “This Place” and “Exposure” articulate different understandings of the role and potential of traditions to create impact kinds of healing. Van Styvendale writes that

recovery narratives contemporize tradition, thereby demonstrating the ongoing relevance and life of ancestral ways, and they often favourably depict the hybridization of the 'modern' and the 'traditional,' but they appear to do so mainly within the context of a rural/reservation space. (36)

For Brandt, a traditional healing practice allow David to both situate his own personal narrative within larger cultural stories and to come to terms with his own approaching death. In Wheeler, tradition exists insofar as it is denied: Martin and Kris are barred in multiple ways from participating in life on the reserve, and in their alienation they are also equally excluded from the cultural life of the reserve. In dealing with their HIV infections, Martin and David draw on tradition in different ways: David's positive experience with tradition envisions a more idealistic use of such practices than does Martin's experiences of restriction and exclusion.

In “This Place,” the blended narratives during David's vision show his own personal experiences of life as a gay Aboriginal man in an urban environment combining with historical experiences of collective colonial abuse and traditional stories:

David was falling was falling back into wet leaves and it was autumn the air smelled like winter he was a boy a boy who jumped up from wet leaves and ran he ran he was chasing something he felt so good so good this is what childhood is you run you laugh [. . .] He was talking . . . *and then the church people sent their missionaries here to teach us to be christian but we* [. . .] the rattle of the turtle the first man he loved Thomas Thomas . . . *they kept killing us off* . . . Tommy Tommy singing sighing joining (62-63; emphasis in original).

The vision begins with Joseph giving David a snakeskin, and explaining that “a snake doesn't just put on a new skin with different colors. She has the same one, just layers of it. She doesn't become a new snake, but older and wiser with each shedding. Humans shed” (60). In David's vision, no one narrative is given dominance—instead, the very sentences of the different stories intertwine with one another, in a rhetorical move that denies any one narrative prominence. The textual intermingling of stories is mirrored in David's sense of self, where different parts of his identity combine. Like the snakeskin, the text of David's narrative symbolizes the layered and polyvalent nature of his identities. And, also like the snake, David eventually comes to realize the sum total of all of the identities that is a source of personal strength for him, just as the repeated sheddings of the snake only encourage growth

The blended narratives situate David's HIV within larger narratives of colonial discourse, by placing his own personal life experiences into dialogue with older, more collective narratives. Joseph gives David several talismans from which David finds

strength through their association with history. Throughout the text, David's fear of death is recurrent, preventing him from completely reconciling his divergent experiences within himself. After his vision "David moved his hands on the blanket to find the tin, the snakeskin, his ancestor's words, the feather. He touched them and felt Joseph's presence. [. . .] He opened his mouth to say goodbye" (66). The association between HIV and death (and, in this, the terminal condition of David's AIDS) initially prevents David from achieving the reconciliation that he desires in his return home, but the spiritual journey he undertakes with Joseph allows him to lose the fear of death that so poisoned him earlier in the text.

In Wheeler's "Exposure," the role of tradition is less certain. Wheeler problematizes the role of tradition in Aboriginal narratives by focussing on the ways that abuse and prejudice bar people like Martin from the community and tradition that they require. Indeed, the very title of the text indicates the concern that Wheeler's novella takes with outside influence. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "exposure" as "the action of uncovering or *leaving without shelter or defence*; unsheltered or undefended condition. Also, the action of subjecting, *the state or fact of being subjected, to any external influence*" (my emphasis) and the vulnerable state implied in the title is certainly present in the text. Just as concerns about exposure to HIV and vulnerability to the virus (and possibly to Martin's sexuality as well) fill the text, so too do issues of exposure illuminate some of the anxieties about the exposure of Aboriginal culture to foreign influence, and the ultimate vulnerability of all members of the community. The anxieties about HIV that circulate in contemporary discourse reveal themselves in the denial of community to Martin, as anxiety about exposure to both HIV and homosexuality bar Martin from home and tradition and community. While Brandt's story is about tradition as

a source of healing, the role of tradition in Wheeler focusses more on how different characters become alienated from these traditions, and how (and why) they attempt to return.

In the beginning of “Exposure,” Kris lives an urban existence very different from his childhood on the reserve and in residential schools. In Kris's urban life, “skyscrapers filled the sky, cars buzzed beneath webs of wires, and hookers patrolled the street” (163). The reserve, for Kris, is far away, and he “shut his eyes, trying to picture the reserve. Would the rolling hills still seem like hills? Would the road still be shit? Would the old houses still be standing?” (164). One of Van Styvendale's comments on recovery narratives is relevant for Kris's situation:

recovery narratives return their protagonists to 'tradition with a difference,' but they nevertheless sediment the idea of the urban as alienating [. . .] Stories of recovery begin with the displacement and alienation of their protagonist from his or her homeland and kin, and then trace the protagonist's journey, often to an urban centre, where he or she attempts to navigate his or her losses, while simultaneously re-instilling them. In the end, the protagonist returns home, recovering his or her sense of tradition, community, and indigenous identity (31).

The journey away from home, for Kris and Martin, is not followed as faithfully in Van Styvendale's analysis, but the central trajectory of displacement and return is key. Rather than focus on the leaving, Brandt and Wheeler highlight the return, with the actual time of urban experience explored largely through implication, the focus being on the problematic return home—a home that is deeply changed.

Brandt and Wheeler reveal different ideas about how Aboriginal communities function, and both authors problematize and engage with the realities of life on the

reservation. Brandt's more optimistic vision contrasts with the troubled community of Wheeler's text; when read in tandem with one another, the two stories provide an interesting commentary on the way that understandings of HIV manifest themselves in reserve communities through action and story. The "classic" and "counter" recovery narrative framework I have been using to discuss the two stories breaks down somewhat when applied to Aboriginal communities in the context of HIV/AIDS. "This Place" and "Exposure" both engage with the idea that contemporary experiences of Aboriginal people living with HIV/AIDS, particularly when homosexual identities are also at play, have been inadequately integrated into understandings of life experience on the reservation. Through their narrative engagement with this, both Brandt and Wheeler suggest that incorporating HIV into these stories is a critical step towards breaking the oppressive silence around the virus. Mark Shackleton speaks to this in his comments on Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, as he observes that "AIDS becomes a 'home truth' that can never be spoken" (160), a comment that is equally relevant to the HIV-related anxiety and avoidance present throughout Brandt and Wheeler as well.

Wendy Pearson, as quoted earlier, reads Brandt as suggesting that it is "possible to both 'be gay [and] be an Indian'" (170) on the rez, but I am unconvinced that "This Place" makes such a neat conclusion. Certainly, the story *gestures* towards this kind of eventual acceptance, but I would add "and be HIV positive" to the list of identities that need to be reconciled. While Brandt's text suggests, through Joseph and David's conversations, an eventual move towards more acceptance of two-spiritedness, David's identity as an HIV-positive man is not included, despite the fact that he tells stories of how his HIV positive status became an important part of his identity. David tells Jacob of how

when [he] was diagnosed, [he] thought, well, now I don't have to pretend



anymore. It's all out in the open. [. . .] [David] got real active in AIDS work. [He] wanted to reach out to all the Indian gays [he] knew, form support groups, lean on each other. Cause the other guys just didn't understand [them]. [He] was a fireball for two years, real busy, but then [he] got too sick to do much of anything. (56).

David admits to being “scared shitless” (56) of death, and explains how he returned to the reserve because his friends “couldn't take care of [him] anymore” (56). In this way, HIV is represented as the catalyst for his return to the reserve, but it goes unacknowledged in Pearson's critique of the text. I contend that, for David, being HIV positive is an equally important identity, one that structures his life alongside his sexual identity. David himself discusses how he found in his HIV positive status a desire to “reach out to all the Indian gays [he] knew” (56), and in a curious way his HIV infection becomes the starting point for the creation of community. Indeed, the most notable result of the vision journey that Joseph guides David through is that David ultimately finds a way to come to terms with his death—which was intimately connected both physically and psychologically to his HIV/AIDS.

In “This Place,” then, Brandt's text speaks to the need for the wide variety of indigenous identities expressed in David's single person to coexist and be recognized as contributing to David's life. This emphasis on the plurality of identity is, in a way, characteristic of recovery narratives—Van Styvendale writes that “the discourse [of recovery] recognizes the mutability of indigenous identity, while it simultaneously conveys the idea of indigeneity's 'truth’” (11). As Van Styvendale explains, recovery narratives often both assert a plurality of some Aboriginal identities while nevertheless pushing “other articulations of Nativeness underground” (13). For “This Place,” I see the acceptance of *some* identities and rejection of others as linked the discursive control over

life on the rez, where certain community controls extends to plural identities. In “This Place,” while David's identities as an Aboriginal man and as a gay man are dealt with, his identity as an HIV positive man is swept under the rug.

The reserve community that Wheeler envisions in “Exposure” is more troubled than the one in “This Place.” Kris and Martin return to a reserve rife with tension, prejudice, violence, and hatred. Some of Pearson's comments about “This Place” resonate even more strongly with “Exposure,” as the fictional world Wheeler constructs is indeed “a reminder of the historical consequences of colonialism for natives peoples” (169), more so than Brandt. Unlike the hopeful tone of Brandt's text, Wheeler's more grim vision of HIV/AIDS acceptance speaks instead to the long road that the reserve community in his story has to take towards acceptance. Throughout “Exposure,” the consequences of colonial exploitation are depicted: from the experiences of Kris and Martin at residential school, to the drinking habits of their father, and (essentially) to the attitudes towards Martin displayed by members of the community. “Exposure” explores the permeable boundaries of the rez, re-positioning “home” as a site that is just as vulnerable to outside influence as was Martin to the HIV virus. The road to acceptance, suggests “Exposure,” is one fraught with the influence of hegemonic colonial structures that seek to marginalize people such as Martin. The conclusion of “Exposure,” after Martin has died and Bev has revealed to Kris that she is herself HIV positive, ends with a wary expression of hope:

[Bev and Kris] laughed and walked towards the road. The wind blew dead leaves as winter's breath hummed about.

'Maybe they'll find a cure,' Kris wondered.

'Maybe you'll quit drinking,' Bev countered.

'Maybe.' (222-23)

While Wheeler's wariness could be read as pessimism, I read it in context of the wider genre of recovery narratives. When "Exposure" is read alongside more classic recovery narratives such as "This Place," it provides a commentary on the lengthy process required to fully heal communities such as the one in "Exposure," resisting "quick-fix" narratives of acceptance.

In the larger discussion about recovery narratives, and the sociopolitical function of such narratives, "This Place" and "Exposure" add concerns about sexuality and HIV/AIDS to the larger conversation, highlighting the need to include such issues within wider discussions of individual and cultural healing. Questions of place and home are complicated by the presence of HIV/AIDS in ways that bring to light the importance of both recognizing and reconciling a diversity of what Van Styvendale calls "articulations of Nateness" (13). Like Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, "This Place" and "Exposure" work to situate HIV/AIDS into understandings of Aboriginal identities, using narrative to incorporate HIV into the discussion. Both stories suggest in equal parts the potential for HIV/AIDS and its accompanying identities to be reconciled with other expression of indigenous identity, but Brandt and especially Wheeler are cautious in their visions, tempering idealism with assertions of pragmatism: such acceptance is possible, but it is a long way off.

By locating HIV within the tradition of recovery narratives, both Wheeler and Brandt move towards the inclusion of HIV as a meaningful part of certain Aboriginal peoples' experiences. The narrativization of HIV, as discussed in my comments on *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, has the important sociocultural function of inserting HIV into wider cultural dialogues. David and Martin both comment on their own roles as activists within

the HIV/AIDS community, and the mention of AIDS activism in these stories speaks to the way that the texts can play a similar role. By discussing HIV/AIDS in the context of homecoming, both “Exposure” and “This Place” rhetorically bring HIV *into* the home reserve, by documenting the arrival of an HIV positive person to these communities. In this way, the characters of Martin and David begin conversations about the role of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in an Aboriginal community on their reserves merely by asserting their own physical presence in the literary space. Writing HIV/AIDS into these homecoming narratives draws a discussion of HIV into a number of different narratives about Aboriginal existence: that of the urban experience, of the journey home, and then of the home community itself.

As I have previously quoted, Jason Tougaw writes that “AIDS memoirs are written as alternative to silence” (167), citing the popular activist phrase “silence = death.” While both “This Place” and “Exposure” do end with death, the way of dying in these texts breaks the silence that has previously shrouded the narrative worlds. By bringing HIV into the narrative “home,” these two stories speak to the way that HIV and narrative interact to create discussion where there was silence. As Brandt and Wheeler look at two different ways a reserve community could react to the presence of HIV/AIDS, their stories may be read as speaking to the need to start such discussions in reserve settings. Short stories by Brandt and Wheeler might not complete the discussion their stories suggest as necessary, but the narrativization of HIV in this way does go a long way towards opening up these conversations instead of continuing to remain silent

## Chapter 4: Down/town

### HIV and Urban Experience in Gregory Scofield's *Native Canadiana: Songs From the Urban Rez*

*You can't keep / A colonized buck down / (though I've never had problems / keeping them up) – Gregory Scofield, "Buck & Run"*

In "I Used to be Sacred," Gregory Scofield muses "just yesterday i was nosing around / at a turtle's pace / thinking / what an urban turtle like me / should do" (63). The idea of being an "urban turtle" living in North America (originally called Turtle Island by some Aboriginal communities<sup>12</sup>) speaks to issues that recur throughout Scofield's poetry—issues about what it means to live an urban Aboriginal life, and what it means to be a gay Aboriginal man in a city at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Writing about the "urban rez" in the city, Scofield uses the urban environment to discuss the intersecting issues of home, identity, and colonial threat in a contemporary Aboriginal environment. The focus on urban experience highlights the diverse and evolving reality of Aboriginal context. For Scofield, the city itself is a space of colonial authority, but also of Aboriginal experience and resistance. His purview is centred on this urban Aboriginal experience, a focus that reflects the growing population of Aboriginal people in Canadian urban centres. This "urban Aboriginal experience" is frequently characterized by abuse and discrimination, but Scofield resists hopelessness in his poetry. In the midst of "old warped records, / pictures, bits of memorabilia / and lost relations scattered" ("Blood and Tears" 49), Scofield's poetic self is still "saved to pull up these *Ayahkwew* songs / from my still beating heart" ("Owls in the City" 72). These stories in *Native Canadiana* assert

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12 cf. Horsefall in All Nations Hope pamphlet

the *presence* of Canadian Aboriginal people in urban environment, using story to explore how these experiences are part of longer narrative traditions. Jo-Ann Episkenew writes that

Indigenous literature is intrinsically communal in that it seeks to heal the dislocation caused by the breaches in psychosocial integration inherent in the process of colonialism. The goal of communitism is to heal Indigenous communities by reconnecting Indigenous individuals to the larger whole. (12)

*Songs from the Urban Rez* undertakes a similar mission: Scofield's poetry takes into account the alienation and marginalization of urban life and resists it through poetry and story, using the poems and “*Ayahkwew* songs” to connect urban Aboriginal—and especially Metis—communities to “the larger whole” that Episkenew talks about.

Scofield's poetry asserts the presence of Aboriginal people in urban environments, locating imagery associated with non-urban settings in the city to resist the urban/rural dichotomy. Having asserted this presence, *Native Canadiana* goes on to look critically and honestly at the alienating and trauma-filled lives of Aboriginal people in the city, finding in the liminal and transitory character of the urban environment a suitable grounding spot to discuss feelings of disconnection and uncertainty. This investment in setting up the city as a place of Aboriginal experience expands the idea of “home” in Aboriginal literature and discourse, as Scofield is careful not to let the negative representation of the city overpower the fact that urban life is itself a “home” for many. The specific nature of urban Aboriginal existence gives rise to identity politics that manifest themselves in particular ways—Scofield is especially interested in the Two-Spirit identity, which he both locates in the city and helps to solidify as a discrete and viable sense of self. All of the components of urban life in Scofield are mediated by the

ghostly presence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which appears at fairly regular intervals throughout Scofield's tales of urban life. While HIV is, as Sara Jamieson observes, rarely discussed by name, it nevertheless maintains a lingering presence throughout the poems, bringing with it the multiplicity of associations that generally accompany the virus, as I have detailed in my earlier chapters. In Scofield, HIV and colonialism are linked, and his use of HIV in the poems—present, but not central—is a way of resisting dominance of the colonial voice.

The overall effect of Scofield's poetry gives voice to the lived experiences of Aboriginal Canadians in urban environments. Cities in Scofield are places of colonial authority, where the ongoing practices of neocolonialism impact the lives of many. Canadian colonialism—which, through residential schools, the Indian Act, the sixties scoop, and countless other policies has sought to control and silence Aboriginal people by alienating them from their communities—is still at work in Scofield's urban environments, where parental warnings to children “safely tucked / behind the dumpster” are “Don't go anywhere, / don't talk to anyone” (“Treats” 34). The poems repeatedly detail how the continuing colonial practices in urban environments presents specific challenges to Aboriginal people living in cities, such as struggles with drug addiction, urban homelessness, and feelings of disconnect and alienation in an impersonal urban space. Tales of residential school mix with continued discrimination, as in “1986” where

One lousy food voucher  
held up the line,  
my worker's generosity  
was the half-empty bag  
I lugged home. (27)

In “Final Hours in the Lodge (the rootbeer poem)” Scofield describes how “from the 10<sup>th</sup> floor / I watch the city beetles / scurry below, rush nowhere / but everywhere important” (73), a description of alienation markedly different from “Policy of the Dispossessed,” where the speaker “went back and dug in the prairie soil. / There among the buffalo bones and memories / an ancient language sprang from the earth / and wet my parched tongue” (55). In contrast to the feelings of connection and history found in the “prairie soil,” the city is a space of alienation, as in “Final Hours In The Lodge.” These two contrasting descriptions of a speaker's relationship to space demonstrate how the urban environment is constructed as one of isolation and disconnection from what is important—the speaker watched “from the 10<sup>th</sup> floor,” an observer of the rat race in the city—both above it, literally, but also not a part of the community he sees scurrying around.

Cities are also transitory, liminal spaces, and in Scofield the urban environment often reflects the equally “in-between” mindset of the poetic characters. The city for Aboriginal people is often a place of movement and change, particularly for youth (Brown et al). The nature of urban existence brings together different identities in ways that interrogate the intersection of different senses of self, intersections that are highlighted in the cultural melange that characterizes life in the city. In Scofield, the poor quality of life in urban environments nevertheless provides an avenue for negotiating radically different identities and working out community and sense of self.

Scofield's articulation of the impact of past trauma, how one character “talked / distantly of being / slapped at the residential school / how / for years after / she wandered homeless / in her bones” (“1986” 27) is in keeping with research on the nature of urban existence for Canadian Aboriginal people. Urban life for Canadian Aboriginal people is largely—though not wholly—characterized by marginalization and poverty. The 2003



Senate Report on Urban Aboriginal Youth commented on how youth

are profoundly influenced by both historical injustices and current inequities.

Issues facing youth are rooted in a history of colonization, dislocation from their traditional territories, communities and cultural traditions, and the inter-generational impacts of the residential school system. (qtd. in Brown et al 83)

According to the 2001 census, of the 70% of Aboriginal people who lived off the reservation, 68% lived in urban environments. Of this number, 45.1% of First Nations people residing in urban areas lived below the low income line, as was the case with 68.1% of Metis people (Peters 347). Cecilia Benoit, Dena Carroll, and Munaza Chaudry assert that “urban Aboriginal people [. . .] tend to have comparatively higher rates of homelessness, greater housing needs, and higher rates of suicide and are particularly at risk of substance abuse, contracting tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, or diabetes” (822).

Research like this demonstrates how urban environments put Aboriginal people in particularly vulnerable positions. Evelyn Peters astutely observes that “most cities in contemporary Canada have grown in areas where there were, initially, Aboriginal settlements” (342), a point particularly prescient when the historical impulse behind the creation of reservations is considered; Peters also comments that the creation of the reserves created a gap between the urban and reserve space, such that

reserves became 'Native space' and the lands in between were 'emptied' for settlement, materially and conceptually [. . .] These mappings of space and identity come to mean that urban places were increasingly seen as places where indigenous people were 'out of place'. (343)

The controlling and discriminatory attitude of the colonial Canadian government towards Aboriginal communities, as seen in the Indian Act and residential school policies, can

also be found in urban environments in the poor housing conditions, institutionalized racism, and the continued push towards assimilation<sup>13</sup>. Scofield's poetry both acknowledges and resists this dichotomy, finding a “place” in urban environments where Aboriginal experience is central, and in a sense re-claiming the urban environment as an Aboriginal place.

The “urban experience” for Canadian Aboriginal people is clearly one characterized by negative experiences, frequently coloured by past trauma; speaking of urban Aboriginal youth, Brown et al. observe that personal and collective experiences of abuse, combined with the structural inequities of contemporary Canadian society, contribute to the “social isolation” (86) and generally negative and transitory living conditions of urban Aboriginal populations. Isolation, and the way urban environments impair the creation of communities, is yet another way that cities enact colonial goals of social control. These negative experiences are clearly represented in Scofield's poetry, which repeatedly engages with issues of alienation and discrimination in urban environments. Peters' point that contemporary cities were once/still are historical Aboriginal settlements is well taken, however—Scofield's use of the phrase “the urban rez” and his re-articulation of what that space could mean re-positions the urban environment as a place of Aboriginal experience in line with (instead of opposed to) the reserve.

The very idea of the “urban rez” speaks to the negative implications that can colour such a space. While reservations are also often figured as safe spaces of home and acceptance in Aboriginal literature, reservations are historically spaces of containment and exclusion (Van Styvendale)—areas “allotted” to Aboriginal people when their

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13 This push can also be seen in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* during Gabriel's death, as the hospital attempts to prevent Jeremiah from conducting culturally sensitive rites.

homeland was overtaken by European colonialists. These two meanings of the rez are sometimes in opposition to one another in the texts, as the rez is both a safe place and a place of containment—with people leaving in order to take advantage of urban environments and the diversity within. In Brandt and Wheeler (and in many lived experiences) the rez has become a space of home and Aboriginal experience, particularly represented in many texts as a place to return home to. It would be inaccurate and insensitive to read the colonial history of reservations as determining contemporary understandings of the rez; the history is important, but not deterministic. It would be a mistake to over-read the history of reservations into their current literary representations, insofar as the rez is experienced as a place of security; rather, I read the history of reservations as continuing in the present insofar as the containment and control of Aboriginal people has long been the purview of the Canadian government. Scofield does speak to the historical implications of the reservations, and in a discussion of the city vs. rez binary, the colonial and Aboriginal histories of both places must be taken into account.

More “traditional” reservations were spaces the colonial government created to police the actions of Aboriginal people, and the idea of the urban rez implies that the colonial impulse of control extends to Aboriginal people living in urban environments. Scofield's poetry reinforces this subtext, as the poems in *Native Canadiana* often describe the way that Aboriginal people are marginalized in urban life, and how their lives and minds have been influenced by the colonial histories of residential schools and systemic violence. The extension of the reservation into the urban environment is also the continued invasion of colonial authority into the lives of Aboriginal people. Scofield's “She Was Dark,” for example, details a grandmother:

Her *acimowina*

was Cinderella or Red Riding Hood,

Never *Wisahkecahk* or *Wihtikow*.

I didn't think to ask. (45-6)

The characters in his grandmother's stories were of Eurocentric figures, not the tricksters and cannibal spirits of Aboriginal tales. Even as Scofield acknowledges this colonial presence in the poem, he also inserts *Wisahkecahk* and *Wihtikow* into the stories as viable alternatives to Cinderella or Red Riding Hood. This double-sided textual move echoes the way Scofield approaches the urban rez: he recognizes the negativity of the space as a home, but nevertheless acknowledges that the city *is* a home for many Aboriginal people, and that the urban home is as replete with particular meanings for Aboriginal people as the reservation. As in "She Was Dark," Scofield explores the productive ways that Aboriginal culture adapts colonial presence, while still maintaining an awareness of the violent colonial history. In doing so, Scofield's *Urban Rez* poems validate the experiences of Aboriginal people living in the city, opening a textual space for urban experience to have distinct meaning in an Aboriginal context. One of the major functions of Scofield's poetry is to redefine "home" in an Aboriginal context. Scofield resists the city/rez binary, positing that the city is as much home as is the reservation. Scofield writes:

our *iyiniwak* are dropping

like rotten chokecherries

in back alleys or hospitals.

Even owls have migrated to the city,

perched on rooftops or clotheslines

hooting their miserable death chant. ("Owls in the City" 72)

Here, Scofield testifies to the reality of Aboriginal people dying in the city, but also pointing to the city as a place where Aboriginal community and people *exist*—moving the people out of the confinements of the reservations and into the city in order to more fully discuss contemporary Aboriginal experience. “Even owls have migrated to the city,” writes Scofield in a comment on the relationship between the “natural” reservation and the city. The space outside the city—the reservation, in many cases—is associated with belonging and with natural imagery. As he revisits the city/reservation dichotomy, Scofield uses the nature imagery association with the rez and locates it in an urban setting. In “Owls in the City,” Scofield describes aboriginal people as *iyiniwak*, a Cree word for “people”, and as chokecherries (rotten or not), taking the nature-based metaphors out of the rez setting and re-locating them in the city. The characters of “Owls” are described as “coyote ones” who would “tear into you / like a badger.” The owls who have “migrated to the city / perched on rooftops of clotheslines” represent the increased presence of Aboriginal people in an urban environment.

One speaker has a “black bear mother / slight as deer, soft as rabbit / toting her six-pack” (“Treats” 34); another “dreamt my hair / a braided river cascading” (“1985” 24); a group of people are described as “flock starved like pigeons” (“Tough Times on Moccasin Blvd” 97); lovers are described as “bucks” (“Buck and Run” 78-80). The re-location of natural imagery in the speaks to the growing presence of Aboriginal people in the city. Scofield is not, however, presenting the city as an alternative to the peaceful connection his speaker finds in the prairies, but rather asserting an alternative space of identity: the country and the city are not as oppositional as might be expected. By taking images associated with the rez and locating them within the city, Scofield rhetorically breaks down the barriers between the two places. Aboriginal experience, Scofield's

poems imply, cannot be contained in a single location, but are rather present in a multiplicity of places.

In chapter two, I discussed homecoming and recovery narratives as rhetorical techniques used to talk about Aboriginal identity. Scofield's texts add to this wider cultural discussion about identity by positing the city itself as a potentially fertile locale in which to discuss and negotiate Aboriginal identity. While Scofield's poetry does invest in the Aboriginal community-land tie that structures the homecoming narratives of Beth Brandt and Jordan Wheeler, he also deals extensively with the lived experiences in the city, representing those experiences as requiring critical attention just as much as coming home. Brandt and Wheeler focus on the actual homecoming of the text, alluding to urban experiences without actually devoting much page space to it. In contrast, Scofield focusses almost entirely on the actual lived realities of urban Aboriginal existence. In "1986" Scofield writes of arid life in the city, where "hot tears / drenched my Opry dream / and scorched / my throat permanently" (27) as compared to "the middle of the prairie" (28) where

*ekospi ka-tipiskak*

the first seed

sprouted

then another and another

until my flesh, my bones

were as rooted

as the sweetgrass

swaying

as far as

the eye could see. (29)

In “1986,” Scofield demonstrates an awareness of this dichotomy, as he contrasts the alienating urban environment with the welcoming, healing prairie. Instead of only visions of “one happy family / my mom's laughter” (“The Last Uncivilized Indian” 39), Scofield ensures that these representations are offset and informed by images of the “battered rez dog look / sulking down up back again / zigzag the usual dopers ducking” (“Tough Times on Moccasin Blvd” 97). Unlike the prairies, the city does not allow Scofield's characters to feel “as rooted / as the sweetgrass / swaying” (29), but the city is nevertheless the location of influential experience.

Beyond establishing the city as a place of home for Aboriginal people. Scofield looks critically on what that home life is—and finds, as could be suggested by the statistics of poverty quoted earlier, that life for Aboriginal people in the city is a difficult one. Part of this difficulty, as suggested by Shelley Stigler, lies in the liminal cultural space the city offers—Stigler writes that Scofield “lives[s] within 'two worlds:' [. . .] Cree communities and the world of the dominant society” (50), and Scofield's poetry reflects the double-sided nature of his world. Scofield problematizes urban life even as he stands behind it as a place of genuine experience. The speaker of “Mixed Breed Act” requests “send me home    homeless as I am” (56), while other poems such as “The One I Thought about Keeping” raise similar concerns about the role of place in building a stable sense of identity. Scofield's speakers feel “rooted / as the sweetgrass” in some places but in others they are “spit, frowned / or pissed on” (“Warrior Mask” 121) in others. The focus on the “urban rez,” in which Aboriginal experiences are removed from the literary reservation into the (perceived to be) alien urban environment, explores how feelings of home and belonging are intimately related to place.

Discussions of home in Scofield are mediated by the occasional appearance of HIV. While HIV certainly *does* appear in visions of the urban rez, it is never referred to directly by name, but is instead alluded to as the “plague” and more generally as an illness (Jamieson). By including HIV, Scofield participates in a textual act similar to those of Highway, Brandt, and Wheeler, inserting HIV into the wider cultural discussion surrounding Aboriginal identity. In refusing to directly name the virus, Scofield does marginalize the textual importance of HIV/AIDS. To do so is to contain it, and to structurally suggest that while HIV is certainly a concern in urban Aboriginal communities, it is not the only concern and is far from representative of all experience.

The urban-specific concerns of Scofield's poetry are bound up with negotiations of multiple (and sometimes conflicting) expressions of identity. Qwo-Li Driskill argues that “Scofield's poetry cannot simply be seen as 'Native,' 'Queer,' 'urban,' 'Canadian' or any of the other words one might want to use to describe it. His work must be understood within the complexities of overlapping identities” (222), an argument that holds up to the plethora of identities being negotiated in *Native Canadiana*. Frequently, Scofield's poetry expresses a sense of liminality in respect to issues of identity—his characters are often in the “in-between” space, a grey area Scofield writes as a positive space of possibility.

In the discussion of identity politics, Scofield writes about the different ways in which his characters negotiate their identities, and how urban existence has influenced certain understandings of self. The poems, which are structured into three parts (“Native Canadiana,” “Songs,” and “Urban Rez”) move towards a politically charged identity that is mobile, active, and angry. Driskill writes that “Scofield's work is forcefully political. It asserts a Two-Spirit and Indian aesthetic and disrupts the hegemony of dominant culture's discourse on Native discourse and lives” (222). The characters who populate the urban



rez struggle with homophobia, racialized discrimination, and inner conflict as they fight to take their different understandings of self and make sense of them. This inner battle is highlighted in Scofield himself, who is Metis. The speaker in “Mixed Breed Act” writes

I'm not solely a First Nations act

Or Canadian act

But a mixed breed act

Acting out for equality

This is not some rebel halfbreed act

I just scribbled down for revenge (57).

Scofield riffs on the word “act,” using it to simultaneously reference the Indian act, his own different identity and the performative quality of self, and the textual act of writing the poem itself. In the context of the Indian Act the designation of people as one rigid category or another had serious consequences, particularly in terms of being “officially” recognized as Aboriginal. This historically dichotomous mindset is exactly what Scofield resists as he insists on his own liminal, Metis sense of self. The combination of these different “acts” argues for the recognition of Metis identity: “Not me alone as extinct / But distinct as we are” (23-24).

This “mixed breed act / acting out for equality” is also someone who speaks from a fluid identity, frequently represented through the mixing of Cree and English. In “3.” the mixed languages are directly referenced:

*haw-nikiskisin*

the language was spoken

always spoken.

*Ekwa ekosi kitohta!* (1-4).

Shelley Stigter writes about this hybrid use of language, asserting that

the juxtaposition of both the English and Cree within [Scofield's] poetry is [. . .] is also a dualistic use of language that results in the dialectic separation of culture and knowledge and the creation of a dialogue between the hegemonic and Canadian Aboriginal cultures (49).

In “The Poet Leaves a Parting Thought” Scofield writes indirectly about the need to see his work from a multiplicity of identities:

I might not be the best  
Indigenous poet  
but hey, my English is lousy enough  
to be honest (123-25).

Scofield is not “the best / Indigenous poet” but his English is also imperfect—his “honest” poetic voice exists somewhere in the middle of the two identities.

In the same poem, Scofield's speaker worries about losing his Cree, writing that  
if I don't give my tongue  
a native language mammogram  
check it regularly  
for English lumps and bumps  
I run the chance of becoming  
totally anglicized (123-25).

The hybrid language Scofield uses throughout the text is here problematized, revealing an

uncertainty about the usefulness of English as a medium for expression such emotions. English is constructed as a cancer, something that infects and kills other cells in order to make its own, and Scofield's anxiety about the relationship between colonial language and Cree reflects this cancer metaphor.

The frequent use of two languages in Scofield's poetry speaks not only to the creation of the dialogue seen by Stigter, but also to reflect in form the move to bring Aboriginal concerns into urban Canadian discourse. The inclusion of Cree language also resists the attempt to erode this language as per colonial policies; Scofield writes "we've got the right to speak / slurred unrefined English / if we want to" ("Street Rite" 116) while also asserting that the Cree "language was spoken, / always spoken" ("3" 2-3).

The tensions between multiple cultures is of key concern in *Native Canadiana*, where the mixture of languages is reflected in the different and often contrasting experiences of life in the city. Urban living in Scofield's poetry is more often than not quite negative, but Scofield does frequently find different, often liminal, communities; in "2.", Scofield writes

Years later  
I met others downtown,  
all piss-moon talkers.  
The yellow lines  
dividing the road  
said which side we belonged on.  
The alley or ditch  
was where we pissed,  
all swapping coyote scents,

charming  
the scarred moon face  
out of her  
shameful silence. (37-50)

The intersecting nature of identity in Scofield is expressed through the “yellow lines / dividing the road” (40-41) and the contrast between the “alley or ditch” (43). Identity in the poem is separated by lines on the road, an image of the city. The urban and the natural layer onto one another in the poem, as the city-based “alley or ditch” (43) is also where the characters swap “coyote scents” (45). Rhetorically as well as thematically, Scofield engages with issues of liminality and of frustration with the choice between the alley and the ditch as delineated by road lines. He further engages with the frustration of dichotomous identities in “Piss 'n' Groan,” where he writes:

When the sun comes out  
the streets smell like piss  
down here  
it doesn't matter what side  
of the skids  
you're on  
you could be better than me  
I really don't give a damn (118).

“3.” also deals with issues of dichotomy, as “that damn piss-moon” (23) caused the speaker's “lazy tongue / flopped involuntarily” (18-19). The image of the “scarred moon face” (48) that closes the poem speaks to the ways that change has happened in a permanent way—the moon is scarred, not unblemished.

As I have discussed in the introduction and in other chapters, HIV often appears at places where boundaries are blurred and complicated; rhetorically, it is a signifier of liminal states. This liminality of HIV is reflected in Scofield's poetry, as the collection *Native Canadiana* explores the boundaries between identities, and how those boundaries can be negotiated. Shelley Stigter argues that Scofield “establishe[s] boundaries as well as cross[es] them, thus creating the dialectic in addition to the dialogue between the two cultures” (50). Even as poems like “2.” acknowledge the boundaries that exist for Aboriginal people, Scofield's poetry as a whole is still transgressive in terms of identity politics.

These identity politics are highlighted most strongly in the discussion of two-spiritedness in Scofield's poetry. Qwo-Li Driskill says of Scofield that “by integrating his experience as a Two-Spirit Metis Cree living under the government of Canada, Scofield brings us to a more complex perspective of the experiences of First Nations people in the Americas” (234). Driskill's comment resonates with the impact that Scofield's discussion of multiple kinds of intersecting identities has in *Native Canadiana*. Scofield uses the two-spirit identity<sup>14</sup> as a way to discursively carve out a space for positive identity that is neither heterosexist or Eurocentric. Driskill focusses on Scofield's investment in Two-Spiritedness, writing that “Scofield helps tell our stories as Two-Spirit people, celebrating the intricacies of who we are both within and outside of power, and sovereign identity that is needed for us to survive as colonized people living with layered forms of

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14 All Nations Hope explains the term “two-spirit” as the following: “ta recent term that was coined by an Elder from Winnipeg in 1990, and it encompasses Aboriginal Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexed People. Two Spirit is much more than just sexual orientation, it goes deeper into spirituality, roles and gender. Two spirits traditionally were Medicine People, Healers, Teacher, Seers, Artists, Spiritual Guides and Meditators. There was great respect and honor for Two Spirits and they held important spiritual and ceremonial responsibilities. Two spirits have both the male and female spirits and are the balance between man and woman.”

oppression” (228). Since the term “two-spirit” is relatively new—coined only six years before Scofield's collection was published (*All Nations Hope*)—Scofield's decision to rely heavily on the term lends it weight and, in a sense, cements it as a full identity.

In “Another Street Kid Just Died,” the speaker discusses a street kid whose tricks just thought his was some exotic Indian rent-a-princess. But we heard he did a lot for the Two-Spirited people. He was their tranny-granny keeping them all in check. He even know how to give them shit without saying anything. (103)

In this poem, Scofield both acknowledges the invisibility of Two-Spirited Aboriginal people, as the speaker did not “even know his [the kid who died] real name or what rez he escaped from” (103), and the people who had sex with him knew nothing about him, thinking instead that the person was “some exotic Indian rent-a-princess” (103). Scofield, however, makes a point to expand the story of the street kid a bit more, emphasizing the near-mystic sounding status of a “tranny-granny keeping them all in check” (103).

“Another Street Kid Just died” acknowledges the existence of two-spirit people in urban environments, raising awareness through the performative poetry. The poem also hints at the past (and present) invisibility of many Two-Spirit people—the title, “*Another* Street Kid Just Died” (my emphasis) implies that there have been other stories just like this one.

Driskill writes that using the term 'two spirit' “helps us decolonize our bodies and minds from the homophobic, sexist, transphobic, and racist-ideologies that are entrenched in European occupation of Turtle Island” (224-25). “Another Street Kid Just Died” explores how such a political purpose can work in a poem: the mysterious, nameless Two-Spirit street kid's death is further elucidated in the poem to include certain nuances about his life and to reinforce the importance that the street kid had in certain communities. The poem does not suggest that poetry or stories can solve the problems of

toxic ideologies (after all, the child is dead), but by refusing to poetically ignore the person and to instead develop a more nuanced understanding of the person, Scofield puts the term “Two Spirit” out into the lexicon available for discussing Aboriginal identity and sexuality. Driskill's observation that “Scofield resists Two-Spirit invisibility that lumps us together with white Gay identities and [Scofield] honors traditions that are often silenced or hidden” (226) is very much at play in “Another Street Kid Just Died,” where the speaker of the poem insists on sharing a fuller and more nuanced remembrance of the kid's life.

Scofield also “births” Two-Spiritedness as an identity in the poem “*Ayahkwew's Lodge*,” which details the birth of a Two-Spirit child:

In the lodge  
there was an old woman  
who had woken in the night  
to a lightless presence.

She was instructed  
to make offerings,  
bring water and blood

[ . . . ]

In the blood  
a twinning spirit was seen.

The water  
was marked by thunder.

*Ayahkwew* prepared the rattle,  
placing inside

the child's umbilical cord. (10-23)

The birth of the Two-Spirit child is also, in a sense, the birth story of Two Spiritedness as an identity in *Native Canadiana*. Because the actual term “two-spirit” is so new, writing the story of a child being born under that particular terminology has creative repercussions: the side-by-side comparison of *Ayahkwew*, the much older Cree word, with Two-Spirit, the English interpretation and translation, emphasizes both how the English word is not an equivalent but a substitute for the whole story and also inserts “Two Spirit” into the rhetoric surrounding “Ayahkwew,” the Cree word. The poem's repeated emphasis on sight, from the “lightless presence” (13) to the “twinning spirit [that] was seen” (18) to the “dawn” (24) when the child is named, tracks the progression of a Two-Spirit identity from invisibility to public recognition and light. The poetry serves a similar function, by moving towards recognition (or “seeing”) Two-Spiritedness as an identity.

The impact of the integration of an English term into a Cree concept is clarified by an observation Driskill makes, as

Two-Spiritedness is understood within Native contexts and traditions. Our experiences are always entwined with histories of genocide and racism. Scofield's poetry helps us remember our traditional understanding of gender and sexuality. His Cree heritage provides him with a map to understand his Two-Spiritedness. (226)

Scofield does this with humour, as well, writing of a pushy redneck “that one would make good soup / at a Two-Spirited gathering” (“I used to be Sacred” 49-50). Thus, the presence of both “Another Street Kid is Dead” and “*Ayahkwew's* Lodge” are necessary for Scofield's discussion of two-spiritedness. As Driskill comments, the “histories of



genocide and racism” cannot be ignored, but the positive tone of “*Ayahkwew's Lodge*” prevents the poetic discussion of two-spiritedness from becoming one of death and elimination. “I Used To Be Sacred (on Turtle Island)” reflects Driskill's observation, as Scofield writes

The first Two-Spirit didn't come about  
because the Great Mystery was having  
a confused day.

We got put on Turtle Island  
for a reason—that wasn't  
just to hang around the city  
looking desperate (1-7)

By referring to North American as Turtle Island, Scofield enforces the entitlement and belonging that Two Spirits have to the place, resisting the European name and through it the toxic influx of European heterosexist ideologies.

Scofield's discussion of Two-Spiritedness, and of sexuality and urban life in general, is haunted by sly references to HIV/AIDS. As in Brandt, Wheeler, and Highway, the presence of HIV in the text signals certain complicated meanings and associations. Scofield deals with these indirectly, very infrequently referring to HIV/AIDS by its actual *name* (Jamieson), but instead calling it the “plague.” Scofield writes about being “sick,” as in “Queenie”:

When first  
I heard Queenie was sick  
I went out of my head  
thinking

I too would be a goner  
in a couple of years,  
maybe months, even days.

Death came to me  
on a bus traveling west  
back to the city  
from where I was born. (68)

Scofield works backwards from the allusions of HIV, rather than the opposite: by talking about a man named “Queenie” who was “sick” and who dealt with addiction (as Queenie joked about gaining “seven extra years / (probably the booze / preserving his insides)” [69]), Scofield challenges his readers to make their own assumptive links, and to explore the associations they make with HIV that lead them from this kind of vague reference to the virus itself.

Sara Jamieson reads *Native Canadiana* as a kind of AIDS mourning work, arguing that

Scofield confronts the inter-related spectres of the doomed homosexual and the 'vanishing' Native by deploying them strategically in ways that protest the mismanagement of the AIDS crisis among Native peoples on the streets of Vancouver, as well as in the communities from which many of them come (n.p.)

These strategically deployed tropes are matched by Scofield's use of HIV; Jamieson contends that

[Scofield's] poems of mourning for those who have died articulate a sustained critique of the political and economic contexts that contributed to their deaths:

these poems characterize AIDS as the continuance of a colonial history that saw Native populations devastated by disease; they register the elision of Native peoples from the discourse of AIDS activism; and they identify homophobia within Native communities as a form of collusion with the dominant culture that puts Native people themselves at risk (n.p.)

Jamieson perceptively argues that HIV is a stand-in for colonialism in Scofield, a trope present in Brandt, Wheeler, and Highway as well. However, Jamieson overstates the dominance that HIV has in Scofield's work. If, as she accurately comments, HIV and colonialism are linked, then to read HIV in such a deterministic way into the poems is to give colonial authority a power in *Native Canadiana* that I see Scofield resisting.

Scofield's representation of HIV/AIDS continues the use of HIV as a stand-in for colonialism found in Brandt, and the presence of the virus is a threatening force in the poetry, complicating attempts to positively re-articulate Aboriginal urban existence. Scofield writes of the devastation wrought by the HIV virus in the urban rez; at one point, the speaker of "Owls in the City" speaks of the changing nature of urban life, writing

That was back in the '80s  
before the plague really hit.  
What did we know?  
Everything about the snagging was easy,  
no one thought beyond the party  
Today it's worse—  
our *iyiniwak* are dropping  
like rotten chokecherries  
in back alleys or hospitals

[. . .]

[. . .] i think

how fortunate i am—

saved to pull up these *Ayahkwew* songs

from my still beating heart. (32-48)

As I commented earlier, this section of “Owls in the City” brings the natural imagery associated with the rural reservation into the urban environment, but it also introduces HIV to discussions of urban Aboriginal identity without letting HIV overpower the whole discussion. By referring to it as the “plague,” Scofield firmly contextualizes HIV within a longer history of infectious disease in Aboriginal communities, but also avoids the actual acronym, which carries with it other, potentially distracting, allusions.

The colonially-rooted HIV impacts the entire discussion of identity and home that otherwise informs *Native Canadiana*. HIV represents the continued colonial abuses, and the boundary-crossing tendencies of HIV as literary device fit well in the liminal environment of the city. In contrast to Brandt, Wheeler, and Highway, Scofield restricts HIV's ability to control his poems, and in doing so Scofield turns to the focus on *life* with HIV/AIDS, instead of death. That is not to imply that people do not die from HIV-related causes in *Songs from the Urban Rez*, but rather to say that the restriction of HIV as metaphor moves the focus of the poems onto the living conditions of the people, rather than just their status as HIV-positive people. This discursive move emphasizes the contextualized nature of the HIV virus, implying that it is part of a wider range of experience and, like colonialism, not the sole determining factor in urban Aboriginal lives.

Life on the urban rez as Scofield describes it is frequently harsh and abusive, but

his description of the different issues that circulate in the city—concerns about identity, home, and Two-Spiritedness—ultimately resist the colonial control inherent in the very concept of a reservation. By expanding the definition of home and engaging in a discussion of the different kinds of identity and Two-Spiritedness, Scofield re-maps the city to become an “urban rez.” The city, which would otherwise be understood as a place of colonial authority, is re-articulated as a place of legitimate Aboriginal experience. The idea of the “urban rez” brings the otherwise conflicting spaces of colonial urbanity and Aboriginal rural life into the same place, positing that such a sharp distinction is ultimately unproductive. While life on the urban rez as Scofield sees it is far from pleasant, his poetry resists the colonial claim to authority over the urban environment, and instead he positions it as a liminal place in which multiple senses of community and self can be negotiated.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

*“As variables in the grand scheme of creation, in our origin stories we enter the world as both fragile and resilient beings. Like viruses, we are difficult to contain.” -Lee Maracle*

In *Storied Voices in Native American Texts*, Blanca Schorcht makes a perceptive comment about contemporary Aboriginal texts:

contemporary Native writing moves beyond the mere imitation of reproduction of a European, or mainstream North American literary style. Native authors translate the genre conventions of Native oral tradition into written forms, developing Native perspectives on North American literature and history. Native American and First Nations novels are, in fact, literary recreations of a familiar Native genre in the context of European colonization, but where the 'pivot' is no longer colonial. (5)

Schorcht's point is well taken in the context of the texts I have examined in this project: the community-oriented goals of orature and storytelling in Aboriginal contexts are evident throughout the different works. Storytelling in communities helped not only to make sense of the world by telling familiar stories, but also to incorporate new stories into older narratives: stories are fluid beings, and the stories of Brandt, Wheeler, Highway, and Scofield reflect the changing nature of life for Aboriginal people in Canada. Their stories reach out beyond the page and into communities, just as the experiences of those communities have impacted the content of the stories themselves. This reciprocal relationship with story speaks to how the contemporary existence of Aboriginal people in Canada continues to be profoundly impacted by story: for example, Scofield's poetry of

Two-Spirited people living in urban environments drew from those communities, which he encountered in his work as a youth worker (Jamieson), but also moves back towards those same people by legitimizing and codifying their experiences in his poems.

Emerging from story experienced as multifaceted and lived, the literary representation of HIV gains a profound significance. Aboriginal communities have been disproportionately impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the sheer physical devastation of the virus is made only worse by the toxic, negative assumptions that accompany its presence. The virus is metaphorical on several levels: it is itself a metaphoric way to discuss infection and contagion, but the social reality of HIV/AIDS lends it an agency that supersedes the virus itself. HIV is a useful tool for talking about a range of traumatic and abusive situations that are associated with the virus, or with behaviours that lead towards infection. In an Aboriginal context, those associations are overwhelmingly tied to colonialism and trauma on both individual and cultural levels. The legacy of colonial policies, including previous epidemics, the Indian act and—especially—residential schools, haunts and is haunted by the representation of HIV/AIDS. For Aboriginal communities, HIV/AIDS is both a contemporary virus that reflects the changing nature of Aboriginal life, but also part of a historical narrative of colonial abuse and evidence that such abuse continues today. As such, writing HIV is both a way of looking back to the past, but also of dealing with the present and future, a multi-faceted gaze reflected in the texts examined. In Wheeler, Brandt, and Highway, the gaze is largely backwards, as the characters dealing with HIV find themselves and their families confronted with the repercussions of things past. In Highway's novel, HIV helps unearth the past, bringing to light Jeremiah's long-suppressed memories of childhood abuse. Scofield, in a slight contrast, has a more present-focused and forward-looking gaze

alongside his concern with the past, as his poems both assert the contemporary reality of *living* with HIV, but also deal with the repercussions that the present will have on future understandings of the virus.

Tomson Highway, Beth Brandt, and Jordan Wheeler all explore HIV/AIDS as it is related to death, and more particularly what dying means for someone with HIV/AIDS. Scofield, in contrast, casts his gaze more on the practicality of living with HIV, and how to manage the presence of HIV in a text both rhetorically and symbolically. Highway's text delays the appearance of the virus, but when HIV finally appears it acts as a catalyst, bringing together otherwise disparate narratives in a way that shows how connected the different experiences are. Gabriel and Jeremiah are able to see how their own individual childhood narratives of oppression and abuse are tied not only to their personal trajectories, but also to the larger narratives of colonialism and discrimination of a broader Aboriginal community. Wheeler and Brandt figure HIV more centrally to their texts, dealing explicitly with the "homecoming" that occurs in preparation for death. Similar to Highway, HIV for Wheeler and Brandt is cataclysmic in terms of bringing together stories across barriers—insofar as experiences of exile, homophobia, and identity are connected in the single embodied experience of being HIV positive.

In fact, HIV and boundaries are intimately connected in all of the texts examined. The viral nature of HIV as metaphor might have something to do with this—just as a virus crosses the barrier between self and other in a human body, so too does the HIV virus push against and blur boundaries between different narratives in people's lives. Of course, a virus also creates an important barrier: that of being infected as opposed to being uninfected. Literary representations of HIV function in this way as well, creating as many divisions between communities as they break down boundaries between different



experiences of trauma and abuse. In Aboriginal communities, the infected bodies of HIV-positive community members is mirrored by the invasion of colonially-influenced beliefs about the perceived morality of the HIV virus, and of “foreign” understandings of associated lifestyles and behaviours with the virus, most notably in the appearance of homophobia in communities that historically are not heterosexist or homophobic. These divisions, however, are largely centred around the stigmatized and lived understanding of the HIV virus, and the construction of barriers in relation to these understandings show the ultimate fluidity and permeability of boundaries between communities. In Brandt and Wheeler in particular, the prejudice surrounding not just HIV, but the association between HIV and homosexuality, is represented as infecting the reserve communities from which the HIV positive characters come. Brandt and Wheeler deal most explicitly with the homophobia within Aboriginal communities, as they use the viral infection of their character's bodies to reflect how their communities have been infected in a different way.

HIV exists in two forms: both as the virus itself, which infects bodies and frequently causes serious illness or death, and the lived social reality of it, replete with stigmatized views of what the virus represents. The association between HIV and boundaries resonates with the virus in many ways: HIV is, in a sense, a great equalizer in that everyone is equally vulnerable to the virus. “We all live with HIV” is a popular catchphrase in AIDS Service organizations, and the truth of this statement is seen in the stories examined. The discrimination and stigmatization associated with the virus proves to be just as contagious as HIV itself, and the stories suggest that in some ways this infection is nearly as dangerous as the viral one it mirrors.

The boundary-crossing nature of HIV is also present in the way it incites characters to deal with their different senses of identity. The narratives that are born out

of the presence of HIV frequently assist the characters in making sense of how HIV relates to their lives. Lee Maracle comments on this tendency of story to help influence understanding and action:

mythmakers, storiers are present to bear witness, see, and understand the subject under study, and serves as adjunct to the process, so that they may story up each round of discourse in a way that governs the new conduct required to grow from the new knowledge discovered. (57)

The stories of Brant, Wheeler, Highway, and Scofield all participate in this kind of storying. In different ways, all four authors show how contemporary Aboriginal communities have inadequately integrated and accepted the realities of HIV and its stigmas into their communities and their stories. Their narratives, then, become ways of both drawing attention to this insufficient acceptance, and to do the work of storying contemporary experiences surrounding HIV. By writing these stories, all four authors “story up each round of discourse” in the way that Maracle suggests, using the tenets of narrative to engage in discussions about how HIV and the traumas that lead to it have been under-accepted, and to suggest ways that, in the future, it may be better integrated into both life and story.

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