# René Highway's Dance Legacy Through a Decolonial Lens

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## Abstract

This paper examines René Highway's *Prism, Mirror, Lens* (1989) through an evolving creative process that shifted from plans for live, land-based choreography to an archival, layered, and speculative practice. Highway's choreography troubles dominant readings of queerness not through overt representation, but through abstraction, fractured narrative, and refusal of easy interpretation. Working with degraded VHS footage, phytograms, and experimental layering, the project reframed editing as choreography, composing rhythm, dissonance, and layered perception from archival materials. Interviews with Highway's collaborators activated memory as embodied knowledge, extending the work beyond the stage. Engaging with absence, distortion, and fragmented archives revealed that knowledge can emerge from flicker, multiplicity, and refusal of singular meaning. In this way, *Prism, Mirror, Lens* and the resulting film insist on queerness as method—holding space for speculative survival and positioning Indigenous performance as a site of both cultural continuity and futurist possibility.

## Dedication

To René Highway, who danced new worlds into existence.[1]

[1] To paraphrase Leanne Simpson in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*: "In order to dance a new world into existence, we need the support of our communiites in a collective action" (2011, 69).

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Finally, I acknowledge the personal journey that accompanied this work. My father, Bob Mumford, read *Dhalgren* with me in preparation for this project, and died in November 2020 while I was making my thesis film. My mother, Marrie Mumford, introduced me to the creative world of the Highway brothers and was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s during the course of my MFA. Their love, resilience, and presence remain a constant source of strength.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

This paper delves into the multifaceted artistic journey of René Highway, a pivotal Woods Cree dancer whose work transcended conventional boundaries, offering a profound vision of Indigenous Futurism embodied in motion. My own engagement with Highway's legacy began on February 20, 2016, with a tweet from Métis scholar June Scudeler: "itching to write about Woods Cree dancer Rene Highway's *Prism Mirror Lens* (1989), based on Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*." As a filmmaker deeply invested in Indigenous dance and the burgeoning field of Indigenous Futurisms—built on an understanding of Afrofuturism—this immediately captivated me. Here was an Indigenous artist who, decades ago, was already crafting futuristic work for the stage, intertwining traditional knowledge with speculative vision.

At its core, this paper is grounded in a worldview that posits dance as embodied knowledge. It is through this lens that I approach Highway's choreography, recognizing the layers of cultural memory, lived experience, and visionary thought embedded within his every gesture and creative choice. Indeed, Highway himself found inspiration in the futuristic, with the urban environment as a realm of science fiction—reflecting a boundless imagination that resonates deeply with my own childhood imaginings of cities as futuristic landscapes.

In 1989, René Highway choreographed *Prism, Mirror, Lens (PML),* a work based on the first chapter of Samuel R. Delany's 1970s science fiction classic, *Dhalgren*. This production was his final choreography performed in his lifetime. He would die less than one year later of AIDS related complications. *PML* was a deep collaboration involving Colombian dancer Alejandro Ronceria, lighting designer Jim Plaxton, and music composer Marsha Coffey. The collaborative synergy between these key artists was central to *PML's* creation. Highway's work, particularly *PML*, cemented my belief that had he lived longer, his choreographies would have become as

foundational to Indigenous contemporary dance in Canada as his brother Tomson Highway's plays have been to Indigenous theatre.

This support paper now builds upon that initial inquiry and the creative journey that followed, driven by the following core questions:

1. How does René Highway's *Prism, Mirror, Lens* trouble dominant readings of queerness and futurism, and what interpretive responsibilities arise when representing his work across time and medium?
2. What aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological lessons emerge from reimagining *Prism, Mirror, Lens* through post-production, archival footage, and embodied editing practices?

This inquiry will reflect on my creative process—the questions explored, problems struggled with (including the complexities of representing queerness), and practical, aesthetic, philosophical, and ethical lessons learned during the creation of my thesis. From a detailed examination of my own positionality and the project's pivotal shifts, to a contextualization of René Highway's distinct dance journey, and a deep dive into the choreography of language in Delany's *Dhalgren*, this paper unpacks the intellectual and artistic foundations of *PML*. Situating the work in 1989, at the height of the AIDS Crisis, the paper then moves to an analysis of *Prism, Mirror, Lens* as a decolonial choreography, before concluding with a comprehensive discussion of the lessons learned in rethinking queerness as method and film editing as choreography. Ultimately, this support paper seeks to situate my creative endeavor within broader intellectual, creative, and cultural debates, contributing to the discourse surrounding Indigenous Futurisms, Afrofuturism, queer theory, Indigenous contemporary dance, modern dance, decolonial aesthetics, and the evolving landscape of contemporary media arts.

## Chapter Two: This Wasn't the Plan—Positionality, Proposals, and Pivots

My journey in creating this thesis film was profoundly shaped by my positionality and by the unexpected turns that came with working inside an archive built from fragments—materials not meant to be complete, left behind by an artist whose notes were made for process, not posterity.

### 2.1 My Positionality

I am Métis / Chippewa Cree. In my family, we use Chippewa Cree to remind ourselves of our connection to the formerly "landless Chippewa Cree" in Montana, many of whom are now members of the Little Shell Tribe. But my Great Uncle Louis Thomas always said, "remember the Chippewa," reminding us that we were "Chippewa" (the American variation of Ojibwe), not Cree. I also describe myself as Anishinaabe Métis to encapsulate both my ancestry and my teachings. So I am not Cree, René Highway's nation. I know, however, that Highway drew on a diverse range of Indigenous influences for *Prism, Mirror, Lens (PML)*. It is within this spirit of trans-Indigenous dialogue that I believe my Anishinaabe Métis perspective would be welcomed in interpreting his work.

My film work is grounded in the idea that dance is embodied knowledge, a concept powerfully articulated by Elder Edna Manitowabi in Leanne Simpson's *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* (2011). This perspective, foundational to my own understanding, asserts that movement is not merely aesthetic expression but a profound repository and transmission of knowledge. This understanding informs my epistemology, which recognizes knowledge as carried through movement, land, and archives—spaces where colonial histories and Indigenous presence coexist. I approach archives critically, aware of their incompleteness, their resistance, and their layered relationship to Indigenous knowledge and agency. My ontology is grounded in relational being,

carrying responsibility to both past and future, where identity is expressed through dance, cultural continuance, and resilience. My axiology—the values guiding my research—centres on respect, reciprocity, and accountability. Working with René Highway's legacy brought a heightened sense of responsibility to his story, to his memory keepers, and to the community connected to his work.

A crucial layer to this responsibility includes my identity as an asexual biromantic cisgender woman who rejects gender presentation norms, and how this shaped my research into queerness within the work of René Highway, a gifted gay dancer, inspired by the writings of Samuel R. Delany, a prominent gay author. While my identity is queer, it is distinct from their lived experiences and historical contexts. This distinction necessitated constant, careful self-reflection on how to approach the material respectfully and authentically, without appropriating or misrepresenting experiences not my own. This personal lens underscored the ethical imperative to acknowledge my own perspective and engage with the material critically, particularly when dealing with the work of historically marginalized artists.

My relationship to Highway's work also has a personal connection. My mother, Marrie Mumford, worked with the Highway brothers. She was part of the table read for *The Rez Sisters* before it was performed on stage. She was the Associate Director of Native Earth Performing Arts for one year alongside Artistic Director Tomson Highway, and she acted in *Diary of a Crazy Boy* directed by Tomson and René Highway. She went on to become the first Artistic Director of the Aboriginal Arts Program at the Banff Centre, where she collaborated with Alejandro Ronceria and Raoul Trujillo to shape the Chinook Winds Aboriginal Dance Program, initiated in 1996 and dedicated to René Highway (Elton 1997). I remember meeting Tomson, but

I never met René. I never saw him dance live. I don't have many regrets in my life, but that is one of them.

## 2.2 The Original Proposal

The original vision for this project was ambitious. My MFA proposal, *Bawaajigan (Vision)*, laid out a hybrid performance documentary designed to challenge conventional screen dance by Indigenizing the filmmaking process and approaching it as ceremony. The research question asked: Can *Prism, Mirror, Lens* be salvaged as a lost work of Indigenous Futurisms and reimagined for film?

The plan involved a 20-minute hybrid dance documentary interweaving archival footage, forensic exploration of Highway's choreography and notes, interviews with his collaborators, and a Performance-as-Research adaptation of the work. I intended to adapt sections of *PML* with Alejandro Ronceria, to be danced on the land, in subway tunnels, and in front of a green screen transforming into a speculative, post-apocalyptic Toronto. The visual language of this environment was directly shaped by Lisa Jackson's (2018) VR *Biidaaban: First Light* and Danis Goulet's (2013) short film *Wakening*, both of which influenced my desire to stage Indigenous Futurisms within a futuristic city in ruin.

The goal was not to recreate *PML*, but to be inspired by Highway's process and document how that work could evolve through my lens of Indigenous Futurisms, dance, and film. Maya Deren's influence was foundational to this vision—her approach to filmmaking as choreography, her treatment of the camera as a dance partner, and her belief in the camera's capacity to manipulate movement, time, and space have shaped almost all of my film work. For this project, Deren's influence guided my original aspiration of filming live dance, using the camera as an

active collaborator, elevating the performer beyond individual will and into collective, embodied expression.

Other artistic influences layered into this vision. *Spear* (Page 2016), the feature-length dance film from Bangarra Dance Theatre of Australia, provided an immersive journey of a young Indigenous man coming of age in a modern world, juxtaposing dance on the land with dramatic stage choreographies. Wim Wenders' (2011) *Pina* demonstrated how live modern dance could be filmed off-stage and in unexpected spaces, providing a sort of precedent for *Spear* (Buckmaster 2016). Mike Hoolboom's experimental documentaries of activists and gay artists shaped my approach to non-linear, resistant queer storytelling.

### 2.3 Ruptures, Speculative Detours and Pivots

My research path began with expectations that swiftly met a series of ruptures, each forcing a deeper reorientation of my approach.

The first rupture came buried in paper. While sifting through the René Highway archives at the University of Guelph, I found the program for *Prism, Mirror, Lens*. Printed plainly, it revealed that the main character, Kid—bisexual in Delany's *Dhalgren*—had only one relationship onstage and it was heterosexual (1989). For a work rooted in futurisms and queerness, that perceived erasure hit hard. My response was immediate: a detour disguised as certainty. I planned to gender-swap the main character, a literal correction to reclaim the queerness I expected. This overt representation, I believed then, would realign the work with my vision of what it should be.

It was at this time that I reached out to Alejandro Ronceria—introduced to me through my supervisor John Greyson, who had known both René Highway and Alejandro Ronceria for years, and whose connections became part of how I navigated the layers of this project. I

outlined my plan to Alejandro and then met with him in November 2019. He was direct; he and Micah Barnes felt an overt gender swap risked erasing the subtle queer aesthetic René had already embedded in *Prism, Mirror, Lens*. That detour ended before it began. During that meeting, Alejandro was amused when I admitted I hadn't yet seen the performance on which I'd based my MFA project. I told him it wasn't the performance that drew me in, but the idea, the speculative possibility. Later, when I interviewed him, he shared his own story of following René Highway to Toronto without ever seeing him dance, a parallel that underscored René's unique power to pull people in through his ideas alone.

It was in that same meeting that Alejandro offered an insight I didn't yet grasp: *Prism, Mirror, Lens* wasn't about specific choreography, it was about dancing with light. But I hadn't seen the performance yet. I still believed that live dance filmed off the stage would be central to my project. I didn't realize then how fundamental the manipulation of light was to the choreography, or how that understanding would drive a deeper pivot I hadn't yet begun.

The digitized video of *Prism, Mirror, Lens* arrived on February 24, 2020. I downloaded the file, expecting—hoping—for clarity. Instead, I experienced a second rupture. The footage was dark, degraded, and distorted, with tracking lines cutting across the frame. In 1989, VHS recordings of live performance demanded intense, consistent lighting. However, *Prism, Mirror, Lens* wasn't lit like other works; slides flickered, and handheld projectors cast minimal beams across the stage—enough for the live audience, but nowhere near enough for the camera's sensors. What little was discernible had to be viewed through the visual noise of grain, motion artifacts, and the electronic noise inherent to 1980s VHS low light technology. Pausing the video only resulted in warped, unstable, blurry frames, making detailed scrutiny nearly impossible. What survived on tape was a ghost of the performance, stripped of the visual clarity I had

counted on; it presented another obstacle on my journey with Highway's work. Yet, I did begin to understand what Alejandro meant about dancing with light.

Beyond the visual challenges of the video, the performance itself felt unfamiliar. I had expected to see the cultural and ceremonial layers Highway's notes described, but they weren't overtly present, which confused my initial, more literal interpretations. Viewing the video also added to my confusion about the representation of queerness. Highway's early notebook entries reveal an intention for both male and female lovers. The performed piece, however, notably features the female lover as the only guide for the protagonist's vision quest. Based on my research, I speculate that Raoul Trujillo was intended to play the male lover, and his unavailability led Highway to adapt the piece rather than seeking another performer, thereby transforming the female lover's role. This shift, combined with my own asexual perspective and a limited understanding of queer aesthetics, contributed to my initial difficulty in fully comprehending queerness within the performed piece, posing a significant challenge for my interpretive process, especially given the queer identities of both Highway and Delany. This pivot would take me a long time to fully grasp.

I consulted Alejandro, and we made a plan to remount stage choreography with him reprising his original role. I felt like we were back on track, but it turned out to be another detour. The remount never happened. On March 18, 2020, the pandemic shut everything down. My research trip to interview Samuel Delany was canceled. The plan to film live dance disappeared overnight. The pandemic marked a third rupture—abrupt, total—reshaping the project again.

The pandemic didn't just reshape my creative plans—it changed my academic path as well. I had originally planned to complete an Independent Study with the dance department focused on dance dramaturgy as part of the live filming process. When that became impossible,

John Greyson, Brenda Longfellow, and I designed a new reading course: “Male Queerness and Imagining the Future in *Prism, Mirror, Lens*: Samuel R. Delany, René Highway and performative expressions by queer male artists,” supervised by Longfellow. The course became one way to deepen my understanding of queerness, futurisms, and the intersections between Delany’s writing and Highway’s work.

At the same time, the archives became central to the creative shift—not just as sources of history, but as incomplete, resistant spaces that reshaped how I approached absence, knowledge, and responsibility. Interviews had always been part of my research plan, but they became integral to the film itself—bringing in living memory and embodied knowledge to re-story the archival fragments. Inspired by Janine Marchessault, whose work reimagines archival practice as participatory, embodied, and temporally layered (Marchessault 2013), I used re-storying as a method of activating the archives through memories and layered contexts to re-create a story the archive itself could not hold.

This project marked a departure from my established film practice. My previous films engaged with the land as one archive and the body as another archive, choreographing dancer, land, and camera together. This project shifted that framework. Still rooted in Indigenous dance, it required me to choreograph in the edit suite—working with archival materials and experimental approaches to explore Indigenous Futurisms in new ways. Phil Hoffman’s Process Cinema course became essential to this experimentation—embracing imperfections and layering meaning through what resists easy translation.

I discuss these journeys of discovery in greater detail in “Section 7: Grappling with Queerness and Archival Method: Evolutions of Understanding.”

## Chapter 3: René Highway's Dance Journey—From Caribou Energy to Decolonial Choreographies

### 3.1 Foundations

René Highway was born on November 6, 1954, in northern Manitoba, to caribou hunting parents. He was the youngest of twelve children. His early life followed the rhythm of the land and his Cree parents' seasonal movements, shaped by the caribou and the territory that sustained them. That connection was severed when he was taken to residential school at the age of five—a rupture that would shadow his life and later resurface in his work.

But before residential school, when Highway was just a small boy, he had a transformative encounter with a herd of caribou—a moment of raw energy and presence that sustained him throughout his life: "It was an overwhelming feeling to watch this mass of thundering hooves and flashing antlers rush past me, so close that I could have reached out to touch it. This energy seemed to stir something within me" (Highway 1976). In *Fed By Spirits*, Métis scholar June Scudeler identifies that moment as the origin of Highway's mamâhtâwisiwin—the caribou energy with which he danced (2016). Later in his life, Highway would reflect, "The energy I had seen and felt was, and still is, within me" (1976).

### 3.2 Dance Landscape

Highway's connection to spirit as a dancer allowed him to make "an impossible leap" to the world of professional dance at a time when Indigenous dancers in North American modern dance were rare (Tomson Highway quoted in Posner 1998). "The odds against him would have crushed many men," says his brother, playwright Tomson Highway (quoted in Posner 1998). Beyond the structural racism was the entrenched colonial assumptions about Indigenous performance. Native people were expected to remain within the realm of ceremony, folk dance, or ethnographic display—not to participate as choreographers or innovators in contemporary art.

Figures like Daystar Rosalie Jones (Blackfeet/Pembina Chippewa), Juan Valenzuela (Yaqui), and Belinda James (San Juan Pueblo) were among the few working to challenge those expectations. Jones would later place Highway's work alongside herself, Valenzuela and James, contributing to what she described as the vanguard of modern Native dance (1992).

### 3.3 The Formative Years: Early Influences and Training

René Highway's dance training began in 1969, when he was 14, at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School while he was still attending high school (Engman 1981). His brother, Tomson, took him to see his first ballet and he was enchanted by the "color, light, and energy" and "these incredible beings doing things I have never seen before" (Engman 1981, 33). As a quiet and "internal" child, he was excited to be part of this spectacle where words were unnecessary. "I could go inside myself, discover myself" (Engman 1981, 33).

In between studying at the RWB during his high school years, Highway spent summers studying dance in Vancouver and New York. In Vancouver, he worked with Anna Wyman (Engman 1981) who was influenced by the techniques and theories of Laban, a foundational figure in European modern dance. In New York, he took classes at the newly formed Alvin Ailey School of American Dance (Engman 1981), whose curriculum was shaped by the influence of his mentor, Lester Horton, as well as elements of Graham and Dunham technique (DeFrantz 2004). Katherine Dunham, a pioneering Black choreographer and anthropologist, developed a codified technique rooted in African and Caribbean forms. Her meticulous research and sophisticated choreographies, which blended academic rigor with vibrant theatricality, should have placed her at the forefront of modern dance innovation, yet she was often sidelined into a separate, racialized category (Kraut 2003). Despite this marginalization, her work deeply

informed Ailey's vision and contributed a vital lineage of groundedness, cultural expression, and resistance that artists like Highway would later navigate.

After graduating from high school, Highway "wanted more dance… something that would not only teach me technique, but also allow me to experiment with my body, and release even more of the energy that was bound up inside" (Highway 1976). He learned about the Toronto Dance Theatre (TDT) from Gisele de Montigny, an actress in the play *Almighty Voice* at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1972 who had previously studied at TDT (Highway 1976). Cofounded in 1968 by Patricia Beatty, David Earle, and Peter Randazzo, the Toronto Dance Theatre played a crucial role in establishing and disseminating modern dance lineages in Canada (Saxton & Cornell 1998). These founders, having trained extensively with seminal figures in American modern dance, particularly Martha Graham and Jose Limon, brought a diverse yet interconnected set of influences to their emerging company and school. This dual foundational influence meant that dancers training at TDT were exposed to a rich, albeit complex, spectrum of Western modern dance philosophies and techniques that profoundly shaped the Canadian modern dance landscape.

In 1972, Highway moved to Toronto and attended a class at the Toronto Dance Theatre as an observer. He had never seen Graham technique before. He recalled it being "very earthy. It was more grounded. The energy was more intense, and I felt that I could relate to it" (Highway quoted in Engman 1981). "The technique is based on the fact that all movement begins with the breath, and as the breath flows through the body it can be used to move the body" (Highway 1976). Highway began his daily modern dance practice at the Toronto Dance Theatre.

I believe that Highway was responding to the profound difference between the fundamental verticality of ballet and its defiance of gravity, and the groundedness of modern

dance, which embraced gravity and the weight of the body. He responded to the Graham Technique's use of the breath that "is our life source" as an impulse for movement, requiring "total involvement of both the body and the spirit" (Highway 1976). As Elder Edna Manitowabi teaches, dance is not just an art form but a vessel for embodied knowledge passed through generations: a lived, spiritual practice grounded in land, memory, and community (Simpson 2011). I believe that when René Highway first encountered the Graham technique, it registered not as something new, but as something that resonated with what he already understood through his Cree teachings—the sense that breath is the source of life, the Earth is a source of spirit, and that dancing into the earth is a way of drawing strength from it (Engman 1981).

That resonance, however, existed in tension with the form's lineage. As Izabella Entrekin (2025) notes, Graham's choreographic vocabulary drew heavily from and recontextualized Indigenous and African aesthetics, absorbing these influences into an American modernism that obscured their origins. In this sense, Graham embodies an ultimate American aesthetic—one where artistic creation is implicitly, and often explicitly, intertwined with a history of taking, of appropriation. Yet what Highway responded to was not that legacy, but the trace of what had been taken. In the grounded intensity of Graham technique, he recognized something already his own—an embodied memory stirred, not given.

### 3.4 Expanding Horizons: Cultural Knowledge, Technology, and Abstraction

In 1978, Highway wrote an article where he encouraged dancers to "use their creative energy to move with the grace of free animals" (Engman 1981, 31). In 1979, in response to that article, Highway was invited to teach and study at the Tukat Teatret, a Greenlandic Inuit performance company in Denmark (Engman 1981). During that time, René Highway was deeply affected by the intense creative energy and the powerful contemporary adaptations of old

Greenland Inuit legends. He found the experience highly relatable and inspiring (Citron 1985). Highway particularly noted the profound cultural knowledge displayed by the young artists, who performed and wrote in their own language far from home. This strong Indigenous cultural presence led him to contemplate the contradictions of his own position as a Native artist in a field with limited Indigenous representation, a reflection that continued to resonate with him (Citron 1985).

Shortly after Highway returned from Denmark, with a detour to study at the London School of Contemporary Dance in England (1980), he followed his TDT collaborator Raoul Trujillo (mixed Nde/Comanche/Pueblo/Tlaxcalan) to New York for further study. Trujillo had begun at TDT in 1978, and he and Highway became very close as the only two Indigenous dancers in the company (Trujillo 2023). A paramount influence on Highway during his time in New York was the work and philosophy of Alwin Nikolais, whose company Trujillo danced with (and he would later become a company member). Nikolais was a student of Hanya Holm, a direct student of German Expressionist dance pioneer Mary Wigman (Trujillo 2023).

Nikolais' work was characterized by radical abstraction and decentralization of the human body, where dancers became integral parts of a broader sensory world of light, sound, and multimedia (Trujillo 2023). This spectacle of choreographing with color, light and sound resonated with René, offering a new framework for embodying experience beyond conventional narratives. The pioneering integration of technology—using self-designed lighting, projections, and electronic music to extend the human form and redefine the stage space—was explicitly "anti-modern dance and anti-classical" in its quest for a "new movement and a new way of moving" (Trujillo 2023).

Nikolais' abstract approach to the body implicitly challenged traditional notions of identity and expression. Nikolais fostered a "queer objectivity" by transforming the dancer into an abstract, de-gendered, and de-individualized element within a larger sensory composition (Kowal 2007). This provided Highway with an artistic framework to explore identity in fluid, non-normative expressions of being, aligning with his own journey of personal and artistic freedom. This encounter with Nikolais' avant-garde vision in New York laid the groundwork for Highway's innovative decolonial choreographies, particularly in his cutting edge integration of technology and abstract forms.

## Chapter Four: Inspiration—The Choreography of Language in Delany's *Dhalgren*

René Highway's period of experimentation, abstraction, and fluidity in his choreographic development aligned with the intellectual influences that shaped his later work. One of the most significant of these was *Dhalgren*, the experimental, speculative novel that Highway returned to repeatedly as both inspiration and provocation.

Published in 1975, *Dhalgren* is a landmark work of Afrofuturism by Samuel R. Delany, whose identity as a Black, gay author shaped the novel's unapologetically queer, anti-normative imagination. The novel follows an unnamed, amnesiac drifter—known only as Kid—through Bellona, a city out of time and place, where identity, language, and reality continually fragment and reform. Dense, disorienting, and structurally complex, *Dhalgren* resists conventional narrative and offers a speculative, queer, and deeply musical exploration of perception, survival, and self.

One of the novel's earliest scenes—a sexual encounter between Kid and a woman who transforms into a tree—was a moment that sparked excitement for me, and I believe it would have for Highway too. What gets labeled as magical realism in dominant literary spaces has always existed within Indigenous stories, where shapeshifters, spirit beings, and land itself move fluidly between forms. For Highway, grounded in Cree teachings about the relationship between body, spirit, and land, that scene wouldn't read as fantasy. It would be exciting because it brought forward the understanding that transformation happens through the body, through relationship, through the living world—a truth often dismissed in settler spaces but always carried within Indigenous knowledge.

Beyond that opening moment, *Dhalgren* offered other points of resonance for Highway. The protagonist, Kid, is half Native American and bisexual, navigating a fragmented, nonlinear

world that refuses fixed boundaries—racially, sexually, or otherwise. As a Cree, gay artist working within the fractured space of settler modernity, Highway would have recognized both the complexity and possibility embedded in Delany's text.

I believe Highway was also drawn to the language of the novel—the lyric texture of the prose, its fluidity, and its deep attention to rhythm. Delany's literary work, particularly *Dhalgren*, is imbued with a profound, inherent musicality and a deep understanding of choreographic principles, stemming directly from his lifelong engagement with both art forms. Delany's personal history reveals an early and persistent passion for dance—he "always found dance the most interesting of the arts," consumed every Balanchine ballet in his youth, choreographed dances at a community center, and even attempted a career as a dancer (Delany 2024). Concurrently, his musical education was rigorous; he sang in choirs, played multiple instruments, and composed "atonal music," becoming "knocked out by its emotional expressiveness" (Love 2019). This immersion in abstract, non-linear musical forms, where meaning often emerges from structure and interplay rather than overt melody, cultivated a unique artistic sensibility.

Delany himself speculates: "This may somehow have influenced, in fact, I'm sure it did influence *Dhalgren*. How? I don't know" (Delany 2024). Literary critics corroborate this. Charles Johnson notes Delany's "sentences that are fluid and fully voiced" and his "attention to music and the mutability of language," affirming the prose's inherent rhythm and sonic quality (2013, 68). Jamie Kozol Wojtal's thesis further dissects *Dhalgren*'s structural reliance on "interruption of sentences and repetition" to create a "structural basis for the focus on perception and consciousness" (2023, 43). This formal complexity, where language itself is manipulated to mimic the fragmented and often disorienting nature of lived experience and the limitations of communication, creates a distinctive choreography of language.

For René Highway, a dancer, this implicit musicality and linguistic choreography would have been profoundly perceptible. As a performing artist, Highway was inherently attuned to rhythm, temporal shifts, and the expressive potential of abstract forms and movement. The “fluidity” and “attention to music” within Delany’s sentences, along with the structural “repetition” and “interruption” that embody perceptual experience, would resonate deeply with a mind trained to interpret and create through non-literal, embodied means.

Highway’s own work, *Prism, Mirror, Lens (PML),* known for its abstract forms, focus on light as choreography, and exploration of queerness through subtle, non-narrative means, mirrors *Dhalgren*’s structural and thematic concerns. Delany himself posited: “I assume this is what René Highway saw when he read the book, and because he himself, was a dancer, he may have picked up on that” (2024). This suggests that Highway likely recognized and responded to the inherent rhythm, spatial dynamics, and perceptual explorations embedded in *Dhalgren’s* very language and structure, translating these abstract qualities into the choreographic landscape of *PML*.

This hypothesized connection finds compelling confirmation in my own film practice. In my short film *The Cave*, created using an excerpt from *Dhalgren*’s audiobook (where Kid discovers the chain of prisms, mirrors and lenses) overlaid with archival footage from Act I of *PML*, the choreography aligned seamlessly with the narrative. Without any manual manipulation, the placement created a perfect match of movement, story, and shifting light, with the dark VHS footage and a phytogram further activating the archival material. The natural fit observed in this experimental film powerfully suggests that the inherent musicality and choreographic nature of Delany’s writing truly informed Highway’s intuitive translation of *Dhalgren*’s essence into his own dance work.

Thus, the profound musicality and choreographic structural qualities of Delany's writing offered a fertile ground for Highway's interpretative genius, allowing a dialogue between literature and movement that transcended explicit narrative translation. I explore this dialogue in the next section through Highway's choreography of *Prism, Mirror, Lens*.

## Chapter 5: 1989—Making Art in the Time of the AIDS Crisis

By the time *Prism, Mirror, Lens* premiered in 1989, the AIDS crisis had reshaped queer life in North America. More than half of those diagnosed with AIDS had already died. There was no effective treatment yet. Grief, stigma, activism, and exhaustion had settled into the daily rhythms of many queer and Indigenous artists, especially in urban centres. The pressure to respond—artistically, politically, and publicly—was unrelenting. For those living with HIV, the expectation to produce "AIDS art" was not only culturally imposed but often internalized, entangling grief and creativity in ways that could be generative or suffocating. Thus, not all artists chose to respond overtly. Some, like René Highway, created works that moved through the landscape of illness and mourning without being reducible to those landscapes. *Prism, Mirror, Lens* is not *about* AIDS, but it emerged within a world structured by the epidemic—a world in which the urgency to live, to make, to reach toward something visionary was inseparable from the presence of death.

That landscape included not only dancers and choreographers, but writers, filmmakers, and cultural theorists whose work helped define the aesthetic and political possibilities of the moment. Samuel R. Delany, whose *Dhalgren* (1975) had already become a foundational text in queer speculative fiction, continued to write through the AIDS crisis with layered, unapologetic accounts of sexuality and survival. His novella *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1985) refracted the early years of the epidemic through fragmented narrative and speculative form, blending autobiographical, communal, and imagined registers to critique institutional failure, while holding space for sexual complexity. Through interviews and other writing, Delany argued that writing about queer sex during the AIDS crisis was not an act of recklessness, but a necessary assertion of life and thought—an insistence that desire and ethics were not

oppositional (Long 2013). His work did not offer moral clarity; it offered multiplicity, defiance, and thought in motion—values that resonate with the layered aesthetic of *Prism, Mirror, Lens*.

This cultural surround also shaped the work of filmmaker John Greyson, René Highway's friend and colleague, whose experimental AIDS cinema would become central to Canada's queer visual culture. Films like *The ADS Epidemic* (1987) and *Zero Patience* (1993) challenged sanitized narratives of innocence and mourning through irreverent style, layered visuality, and formal resistance (Longfellow 2013). Throughout *The Perils of Pedagogy*, Greyson is described as mobilizing satire, song, and sexual excess to confront both public health hypocrisy and cultural pieties around grief (Longfellow, MacKenzie and Waugh 2013). His films did not offer singular heroes or digestible morals—they refused the closure that martyrdom demands. Like Delany, Greyson approached AIDS not as a fixed subject but as a field of contested meanings. Both artists resisted the framing of queer bodies as either tragic or dangerous. Instead, they insisted on complexity: desire, anger, contradiction, beauty, and refusal.

This was the world in which *Prism, Mirror, Lens* was created—not untouched by the crisis but not contained by it either. The AIDS era was not only an era of death, but of invention, resistance, and radical dreaming. For artists like Highway, Greyson, and Delany, the question was never simply how to represent crisis, but how to live and make within it—how to hold onto ceremony, abstraction, sexuality, collectivity, and spirit, without succumbing to the erasures demanded by respectability or despair. The work that emerged from this moment did not always name the crisis, but it carried its weight—and its refusal.

### 5.1 Spiritual Sustenance

It is difficult for me to say how much *Prism, Mirror, Lens* was shaped by the AIDS crisis—by René Highway's own AIDS diagnosis, or by the broader cultural hysteria surrounding

the epidemic in the late 1980s. René created this work at a time when AIDS activism and memorialization were deeply present in performance and visual culture, and yet *PML* does not address AIDS explicitly. This may have been a deliberate choice to work on something expansive, imaginative, and spiritually sustaining.

*PML* marked the first time Highway did not dance his own choreography; it also marked his last choreographic production he directed. René Highway was living with AIDS at the time, and died of AIDS related complications less than a year later. However, Highway's choice to choreograph *PML* was not based on being too ill to dance. He chose to step outside the performance in order to grow as a choreographer and to serve as an external eye—something this complex, light-based production demanded (Ronceria 2020, Trujillo 2021). The decision was artistic, not medical.

In Highway's notes, he tries to decide which sense would be the main form of communication in which direction of the vision would proceed. He ends up choosing four senses to assign to the four directions, omitting the sense of touch. Highway writes: "[Touch is] the most incredible way of communication, yet it is killing us. Why?" In another place, he wonders: "What happens when you deprive people of touching?" (1989). It seems likely that Highway was responding to AIDS hysteria and the fear of touching anyone with HIV; he was exploring the idea of touch avoidance as a response to a plague in a futuristic city setting. It's not clear to me whether this concept was translated into the final choreography; Alejandro did not mention it in his interview.

While there is much we may never know about Highway's intentions and decision, it is clear that *PML* was a culmination and convergence of Highway's modern dance training, Cree cosmology, speculative aesthetics, and deep visual experimentation. He had spent years trying to

build a form that was both cutting-edge and timeless, something rooted in his culture but unbound by it. Unlike his first major choreography, *New Song… New Dance*[2], he did not have the better part of a decade to bring *PML* to perfection. The urgency was real—but it wasn't about dying. It was about living as a choreographer, about making something visionary and timeless that would endure beyond his lifetime.

### 5.2 Mamâhtâwisiwin, not Martyrdom

Many beautiful and brilliant gay men died too young because of AIDS. In the face of such devastation, queer communities often turned to the language of sainthood and martyrdom—to grieve, to commemorate, to resist erasure. Reverence became a political tool. Suffering became a site of meaning. Artists and activists were remembered through the tropes available to them: innocence, tragedy, sacrifice, defiance. As Dominic Janes reminds us, "martyrs are co-created by those who memorialize them" (2024, 3). In *Dying to Be Normal*, Brett Krutzsch traces how martyrdom narratives, especially in the AIDS crisis, helped produce public sympathy by framing gay men as innocent victims (2019). Even radical figures like Foucault, as David Halperin writes in *Saint Foucault*, became secular saints—iconic not in spite of their resistance, but because of it (1995).

John Greyson's *Fig Trees* (2009) pushes back on this saint trope. It stages the imagined opera of AIDS activist Zackie Achmat and then interrupts it, letting Achmat refuse the role entirely. Achmat doesn't want to be canonized; he doesn't want to be remembered as "St. Zackie." His refusal exposes how easily memorialization becomes performance—and how quickly political lives get rewritten into narratives of redemptive suffering (Longfellow 2013).

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[2] For more information about *New Song… New Dance*, I highly recommend June Scudeler's 2016 article "Fed by Spirits: Mamâhtâwisiwin in René Highway's *New Song… New Dance*."

From my perspective, Highway does not need to be sanctified in death. He was already sacred in life—through land, through body, through kinship, through mamâhtâwisiwin. He was part spirit, not because he suffered or died young or lived beautifully in the face of tragedy, but because Cree people are spiritual beings (Ermine quoted in Steinhauer-Hill 2008, 51). René Highway was gifted. Flamboyant. Sensual. Disciplined. He was not interested in becoming a symbol. He was interested in creating art that pushed boundaries and resisted easy interpretations.

Sainthood would flatten all of this. It would overwrite presence with purity, replace choreography with iconography, and separate Highway from the mamâhtâwisiwin that was the source of his creative energy. His dying words, “Don’t mourn me, be joyful” (Methot 1998), do not ask for reverence. They ask for continuation. For movement. For memory that is grounded and relational and joyous. I don’t want to sanctify him. I want to meet him where his sacredness moved most fully: in his work.

## Chapter Six: *Prism, Mirror, Lens*—A Decolonial Performance of Indigenous Futurisms

This section explores René Highway's *Prism, Mirror, Lens* (*PML*) as a groundbreaking decolonial performance that powerfully embodies Indigenous Futurisms. By describing and analyzing its three Acts ("Prism," "Mirror," and "Lens"), I demonstrate how Highway carefully wove together Indigenous spiritual traditions, the concept of *mamâhtâwisiwin* (spiritual power), and science fiction narratives to challenge colonial perspectives and envision vibrant Indigenous futures. I draw on a wide range of sources: the insights from inspirations noted in the *PML* program—Hyemeyohsts Storm's *Seven Arrows*, John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, the paintings of Norval Morrisseau, and Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*; June Scudeler's analysis of Highway's earlier work, *New Song... New Dance*; my own MFA research into *PML*, Highway's handwritten choreographic notes; and direct accounts from *PML* collaborators. I also bring in my own analysis, informed by observation, my understanding of Highway's influences, as well as my own life experience and cultural knowledge. This exploration reveals Highway's visionary spirit and his commitment to crafting non-European narrative forms that are deeply spiritual, technologically innovative, and inherently transformative.

### 6.1. PRISM—The Withered Flowering Tree

The opening section of *PML*, "The Withered Flowering Tree," immediately evokes the concept of creation and the interconnectedness of all life. As the *PML* program notes state, "the Flowering Tree represents creation and the world on which we live" (1989). The tree's "withered" state signals a recognition of the profound impact of colonial violence and trauma on Indigenous lifeways and spiritual well-being. This deliberate imagery sets the stage for a decolonial exploration of resilience and renewal.

### 6.1.1 Indigenous and Speculative Dreamscapes

In Hyemeyohsts Storm's teachings in *Seven Arrows*, the Flowering Tree represents the Medicine Wheel Circle, encompassing the Universe, the cycles of life and death, and the path of learning (1973). Similarly, Black Elk's Great Vision in *Black Elk Speaks* centres the flowering tree at the heart of his nation's hoop—a symbol of health, unity, and spiritual vitality (Neihardt 2014). Black Elk's lifelong spiritual quest was to make this tree flower again, a testament to enduring hope amidst hardship. Highway's "withered" tree thus simultaneously acknowledges historical suffering and signals a call to spiritual action—a decolonial act of acknowledging rupture while asserting the possibility of renewal.

The transformation of the tree from withered to flowering also relates to larger themes of transformation within *PML*, like the transformations that filled the paintings of Highway's influence Norval Morrisseau (Anishinaabe). Like Morrisseau, Highway combined contemporary expressions of his culture with an understanding of a spirit world in which painting and choreography "become both a medium… and a potential access to a dream state" (De Zegher 2000, 4).

Highway's creative process itself was fueled by a "dreaming state, whether it's waking or sleeping" to "evoke the spirit" (Trujillo 2023). Micah Barnes further confirmed that Highway was "dreaming into futures as part of his reality," looking to translate "non-linear, non-academic, completely non-European" ideas, underscoring the deep spiritual and visionary foundations of his work (2020). *Dhalgren* itself is often considered a "dreamscape" rather than a linear narrative, echoing Highway's approach to creating a "futuristic, beautiful realm of dreamscapes" in PML (Trujillo 2023).

The section's title, "Prism," finds a parallel in Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*. In the novel's enigmatic opening, the protagonist encounters a chain with "prisms, mirrors, and lenses" used for protection. Through refraction, prisms break light into its constituent colors, revealing multiplicity and complexity. In *PML*, this can symbolize the decolonial process of uncovering hidden truths and diverse Indigenous perspectives that have been obscured by colonial narratives. The withered tree, viewed through a prism, might not be merely dying, but undergoing a transformative process, akin to the woman-to-tree metamorphosis at the beginning of *Dhalgren*, where the natural and human worlds merge in a mystical, non-linear way. This suggests a space where transformation and new forms of being are possible, setting a futurist tone, deeply influenced by Highway's attraction to science fiction as a natural realm for his imagination (Barnes 2020).

### 6.1.2 Performance: Light in a Void

The show starts in darkness, then gentle music rises. A screen on the stage begins to glow slightly, an animal screeches. Then one light. The Man holds a projector above his head, shining the light down over his body, over his bare chest and loose white pants, creating a square of light on the floor. He manipulates and places the projector, as he dances in the lighting that hides more than it reveals. This intentional use of chiaroscuro (the dramatic use of light and shadow) creates a void where the dancer is without context of place or time.

The projected imagery in this sequence—abstract, elemental, gradually shifting—was created by Jim Plaxton in collaboration with Highway. The projections were not decorative but choreographic: visual languages that moved in tandem with the dancers, cueing transformation and signifying internal states. Plaxton noted the obvious lighting terms in the title—prisms, mirrors, and lenses—and drew inspiration from Alwin Nikolais' use of projections (Plaxton

2020). Together, Plaxton and Highway composed a visual dramaturgy that was inseparable from the choreography itself.

The Woman enters as the Withered Tree in an abstract bodysuit reminiscent of roots or bare branches. The dimly lit screen behind them now projects a barren tree that shifts gradually from cold to warm colours. The choreographed duet includes a sexual encounter with Singing Stone (as the Man is named in the PML program), who impregnates the Woman Tree. She then becomes his guide and takes control of the handheld projector, beckoning Singing Stone into what I interpret as the cave from *Dhalgren*. He endures physical trials to receive the chain of prisms, mirrors and lenses from the novel—translated on stage as a medicine circle of light shining on the floor in front of him changing from yellow to green to red to blue. This metaphoric optic chain, which he carries with him throughout his journey, directly echoes the protective chain described in *Dhalgren*. The choreography is at times intense, intimate, humorous, ritualistic, controlled, unconstrained, and transformative. After the screen separates in two and goes dark, after Singing Stone picks up the projector and leaves the stage, the Woman reappears. Gone is the abstract barren bodysuit. In its place, a full skirt indicating that the Tree has Flowered.

The *PML* program stated that all slides were "done by computer graphics"—a revealing marker of innovation at a time when computer graphics were still in their infancy. Plaxton designed and created the graphics on an Aurora computer he had access to at work. He then photographed the graphics on the monitor to create slides (Plaxton 2020). This engagement with digital visuals in this era, coupled with Highway's early use of mapping and projecting onto

surfaces, is one of the reasons why Alejandro Ronceria describes Highway's work as "so pioneering" (2020).

This use of technology, particularly prisms of light, to de-familiarize and re-present the "withered flowering tree" challenged conventional theatrical representation, forcing the audience to see Indigenous realities in a new, refracted light—a key element of Indigenous Futurism.

### 6.2. MIRROR—The Vision Quest (crying for a Vision)

"Mirror—The Vision Quest (crying for a Vision)" positions self-reflection and spiritual seeking at the heart of *PML*. As defined in the program notes, "the Vision Quest is the quest to perceive ourselves within the harmony of the Four Directions. For those who seek understanding, the circle is their mirror" (1989). The mirror in *Dhalgren's* protective chain can be interpreted as a tool for self-reflection and for understanding a fragmented or dangerous environment. The protagonist's crossing of the bridge into Bellona—a ruined city "out of time and out of place" where "a new mythology begins"—mirrors the disorienting, yet ultimately transformative, nature of a Vision Quest. It's an entry into a liminal space where old rules dissolve, demanding new perceptions and ways of navigating reality.

Storm's *Seven Arrows* extensively details the Vision Quest as a crucial path to understanding oneself within the interconnectedness of the Four Directions. It was from this source that Highway found the gifts he associated with each direction: West—Introspection, North—Wisdom, East—Illumination, South—Innocence and Trust (1973, 6).

This quest for balance and wholeness is echoed in Black Elk's "crying for a dream," his lifelong spiritual lament to fully realize his great vision and bring healing to his people (Neihardt 2014). Highway, through this section, invites the audience into a sacred process. Micah Barnes

elaborated on Highway's desire for the audience to "experience it, and . . . journey in it . . . be in it." Instead of simply observing, the audience is invited to embrace a non-European narrative form in which they are "not gonna know even what's happening" (2020). Highway viewed the city itself as "a great big science fiction journey" as he translated the "vision quest to the new environment" of the urban landscape (Ronceria 2020).

### 6.2.1 West—Introspection, Black, Sight

In the West, the projector clicks on, once again interacting with Singing Stone in various colours and positions. This section introduces a projected city skyline as well as The Scorpions: black-clad figures adapted from *Dhalgren.* The Scorpions are at once Ronceria's ninja dancers, Plaxton's Bunraku-like facilitators, and a lighting crew integrated in the dance who create both light and shadows. They manipulate Singing Stone's body with coordinated control—flipping him, repositioning him, then leaving him standing alone, facing upstage, facing the city, the building, pressing his arms against the wall as if in prayer.

The Woman also appears in this section, at first as Singing Stone's reflection. Highway's notes illuminate that she is both his mirror and the city itself (1989). Scattered prisms of light appear on the screen in front of the Woman, giving her the appearance of having wings: the vision of a Thunder Being from Black Elk's sacred cosmology reimagined through light. The section ends with the Man desperately reaching for the projector to shut it off, returning to darkness.

### 6.2.2 North—Wisdom, White, Sound

Amidst music and flickers of light, the Man sits on the floor, while the Woman enters with a pirouette, introducing the disciplined language of ballet. Her demi-pointe shoes, clearly

visible at first, begin to dissolve into abstraction as light and projection interact with movement. The scene's central exploration is a pas de deux inspired by *Giselle,* exploring themes of love, death, rebirth, and forgiveness. Highway's notes also speak of ignorance as the mirror of wisdom, describing this dance as "wrestling with / between wisdom and ignorance" (1989).

The Scorpions return, carrying projectors that cast harsh squares of white light on the floor. According to Highway's notes, these squares represent ice breaking up, the shifting surface of a Northern landscape. The dancers interact with these squares of light, moving within and beyond these squares. Later, the lights shift to a sequence of circles in the colours of the Medicine Circle. Through the rest of this section, an erratic energy builds—Singing Stone is somersaulting over the woman, running, stumbling, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. This suggests that the wisdom Singing Stone has gained is not a peaceful enlightenment but a disorienting, spiritual intoxication (Highway 1989). He throws himself to the ground and crawls offstage in darkness.

### 6.2.3 East—Illumination, Yellow, Smell

This section begins with wolf howls, electronic sounds, city lines, abstract projections, silhouettes, and the "morning star"—a glowing, arched, yellow light projected from behind onto a screen upstage centre (Highway 1989). The Woman emerges as a flowering Tree, joining in frenzied running and jumping with Singing Stone and the Scorpions, suggesting a community coming to life. Highway's notes speak of: "Indecision after illumination. Confusion, running off in each direction: Wisdom, Innocence, Introspection, Illumination, leading into a circle, circling in the same spot" (1989).

The Medicine Circle reappears on the floor, the fire plane that becomes a circle of firelight, a communal hearth that grounds the celestial light of the Morning Star. All four characters—Singing Stone, the Woman, and the two Scorpions—dance around it with frantic energy that matches the music. They return to the fire, the starting point, “tricked into coming together to create balance” (Highway 1989). The Act ends with Singing Stone dancing solo, the weight of illumination too much to bear; he rolls in and out of shadows, overwhelmed by the very light he sought.

### 6.2.4 South—Innocence & Trust, Green, Taste

Singing Stone is carried in by the Scorpions under dappled light, possibly evoking the Spotted Eagle. He is now wearing a white shirt along with his loose white pants, making him a blank slate; the colors are not *on* him but are projected *onto* him by the light. A Horse Dance begins, clearly echoing Black Elk’s great vision, where horses of four colours represent the powers of the four directions. Each carries its own world, its own sky (Neihardt 2014). The dance is a moving medicine wheel, the physical manifestation of Highway’s note: ”because they are a whole, they discover their Balance” (1989). Later, Singing Stone dances with triangular scrims representing “six grandfather rocks” (Highway 1989), as he concentrates his will, his spiritual energy, his mana. He is “singing” to the stones, not with his voice, but with his body. Later still, the Scorpions perform a four-directions step dance. The final movements are about innocence tested, and trust that is reclaimed after disorientation (Highway 1989).

### 6.2.5 Spiritual Energy and Challenging Norms

The “Mirror” section, through its focus on internal and external reflection, showcases Highway’s ability to channel spiritual energy into performance, inviting a profound, non-Western engagement with self and world. The use of lighting in reflecting and multiplying images further

enhances this immersive, transformative experience, inviting audiences into a "process of discovery" that moves from "innocence and beauty and lightness:" through the "jarringness of the city" (Coffey 2020).

### 6.3. LENS—The Shield

The final section, "Lens," represents the culmination of the seeker's journey, embodying clarity, focus, and protection. The *PML* program defines it as reflecting "the individual medicines of the seeker."

### 6.3.1 Synthesis of Knowledge and Protection

In *Seven Arrows*, the Shield is a powerful symbol, representing the personal understanding and spiritual protection gained through living in harmony with the Medicine Wheel. It is a synthesis of one's experiences and knowledge acquired during the Vision Quest (Storm 1973). Highway's "Lens" serves a similar purpose, distilling the insights gained through the "Prism" (refraction, multiplicity) and the "Mirror" (reflection, introspection) into a focused understanding that acts as a shield against colonial narratives and spiritual erosion.

In the performance, this Act is short but effective in its simplicity. The Woman has apparently become White Buffalo Calf Woman, who appears at the end of a vision (Highway 1989). The futuristic soundtrack joins electronic sounds with a recording of the Red Bull Singers, a traditional big drum group. A projection of Morrisseau's *Man Changing into a Thunderbird* culminates the transformative journey, positioning the journey in *PML* as a spiritual act of becoming, rooted in Cree and Anishinaabe ontologies.

### 6.3.2 The *Dhalgren* Connection: Clarity and New Mythologies

The lenses from *Dhalgren's* protective chain provide clarity, focus, and magnification. In *PML*, this implies a sharpened perception of reality—an ability to see through colonial distortions and focus on Indigenous truths. The "new mythology" that begins in Bellona, a mythology not bound by external rules, becomes fully perceptible and applicable through this "lens." This clarified vision becomes the "shield" through which Indigenous peoples can articulate and assert their own narratives and futures, free from imposed frameworks.

### 6.3.3 Embracing Modernity for Indigenous Futures

Alejandro Ronceria's insight into Highway's ability to combine "genealogy, mythology, history and cultural beliefs merging into this conflict of the 20th century… and fascination with technology" finds its powerful manifestation here (2020). Ronceria emphasized that Highway's approach was not about presenting a "poor or romanticized image of the Indigenous man," but about showing that we can survive colonial destruction and displacement "because our ancestors lived through that as well" (2020). The "Lens" represents Highway's futurist vision: an Indigenous future that is not a static preservation of the past, but a dynamic, evolving space that creatively integrates tradition with modern technology.

Micah Barnes' description of Highway creating a space where the audience is not following a story but is on a journey underscores the decolonial move away from didacticism. Highway invites us towards an embodied, ceremonial experience, empowering the audience to forge their own understanding through the lens provided (2020). Raoul Trujillo also highlighted how Highway, Ronceria, and himself were "working to start a movement, to start an exploration into what contemporary Indigenous dance and theater both looked like," bringing "elements of

space, time, shape, and motion through a lens of a sort of architectural ideology" into a "new movement."

### 6.4. Reclaiming Narratives and Shaping Futures

Through *Prism, Mirror, Lens*, René Highway effectively reclaims and re-presents Indigenous narrative structures and spiritual concepts within a contemporary performance context. The performance stands as a powerful example of decolonial artistry, actively challenging Western theatrical conventions and asserting a vibrant Indigenous presence. By integrating cultural knowledge with a "fascination with technology" and a "non-European narrative form," Highway's work firmly establishes itself as a significant contribution to Indigenous Futurisms, paving the way for future generations to envision and shape self-determined Indigenous realities.

My artistic process of creating a film about *PML* further extends Highway's "Lens," using layers in the edit suite to capture the essence of Highway's work and his engagement with light. My personal connection, as a Métis creator honouring Highway's visionary work, adds a contemporary layer to the continued impact and interpretation of *PML*'s "shield" against colonial erasure. My engagement with *PML* demonstrates this continued legacy, highlighting the importance of Indigenous-led research and artistic practice in building counter-narratives and honouring Indigenous knowledge through generations.

## Chapter 7: Grappling with Queerness and Archival Method—Evolutions of Understanding

### 7.1 Rethinking Queerness: From Representation to Resistance

A significant intellectual challenge in developing this thesis was confronting the seemingly elusive presence of queerness in René Highway's *Prism, Mirror, Lens*. I initially expected to find overt representations—same-sex desire, romantic pairings, and/or explicitly marked queer identities. These expectations, shaped by contemporary representations and Samuel R. Delany's source text *Dhalgren*, proved misguided. *Dhalgren* is rich with unapologetic, explicit queer sexuality and fluid identity. *PML*, by contrast, engages queerness in a less literal but no less potent form: through abstraction, structure, ritual, and visual design. This misalignment became a point of productive friction. The perceived absence of explicit queerness required a rethinking of what queerness looks like in performance. Rather than searching for evidence of identity, I began exploring how queerness operates as a formal, philosophical, and speculative aesthetic. Highway's piece queered perception, narrative, temporality, and embodiment—offering multiplicity in place of legibility.

#### 7.1.1 Performativity & Refusal

One illustrative example is a scene that I described as a parody of heterosexual sex—a sexual encounter depicted through the missionary position with the Man on top and the Woman comically shaking her leg during orgasm, over within seconds. This was a scene where humour was unmistakably part of Highway's structure, and I initially understood this scene only on those terms. Eventually, I came to understand its deeper role as an initiatory ceremony necessary to awaken or impregnate the withered tree so it would flower. Yet even that reading proved layered. In conversation with Alejandro Ronceria, I learned that the Tree Woman was deliberately framed as a Madonna character—invoking both the Catholic icon and the 1980s pop icon. This duality

complicates easy interpretations. The Woman's transformation into the Tree further deepens that multiplicity, echoing Daphne's metamorphosis in Greek mythology—a refusal of domination through becoming other than human. Highway's own notes extend that reading through Cree teachings, connecting it to the moon ceremony and cycles of renewal embodied by women. These layered references culminate in Highway's description of the guide figure in Lens. In his notes, Highway writes: "In Sioux Vision Quest society, the reappearance of the White Buffalo Calf Woman signalled the beginning of the End" (1989). Through these interventions, queerness operates not as an identity to be declared but as a speculative, ceremonial practice—a refusal of legibility, an embrace of layered transformation, and a challenge to the imposed binaries of gender and narrative alike.

Judith Butler's notion of identity as performative, always in motion, helps to make sense of the layered transformations embedded in this scene and throughout *PML* (1990). Her framing shifted my understanding of queerness, moving me away from fixed identity markers toward something more relational and dynamic—as embodied through the woman's layered roles and refusals of singular identity within the performance. But it is bell hooks' articulation of queerness as being "at odds with everything around you" that most resonate (2014). Her words ground queerness in refusal, invention, and the work of survival, naming an experience I already carry—where being at odds with the world is not a limitation, but inherently liberatory. hooks frames queerness as a conscious, resistant, and creative way of being, particularly for those marginalized by dominant norms. Her articulation affirms my experience but also opens space to imagine thriving, inventing, and living differently. That understanding has become pivotal to how I see queerness in *PML*. It resonates with the aesthetic and philosophical resistance encoded into

Highway's work. Rather than providing legible identity markers, *PML* queers perception itself, unsettling narrative, temporality, and embodiment through layered abstraction and design.

The formal strategies Highway uses—abstraction, shifting forms, and refusal of fixed narratives—lead me to reflect on Delany's own queering of structure: circularity, disrupted temporality, and sexuality as a disorienting yet generative force. These strategies are also present in the work of filmmaker John Greyson, which spans decades and remains central to contemporary queer cinema. They engage those same aesthetic strategies—resisting straightforward narrative progression and embracing non-linear structure, fragmentation, and formal experimentation as explored in *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson* (Longfellow, MacKenzie and Waugh 2013).[3] This shared queer aesthetic strategy between Delany and Greyson intentionally employs formal properties, fragmentation, and ambiguity to challenge conventional modes of perception and narrative. Abstraction itself—especially in Highway's use of projection, scrim, and shadow—becomes a queer aesthetic of refusal, multiplicity, and fluidity, shaped in part by Highway's time working with Nikolais. The Scorpions, in particular, embody de-individualization: black-clad figures who move as a collective presence, shifting the set and shaping key moments of the performance.

### 7.1.2 Queerness as Method

This reframing of queerness shaped my filmmaking decisions. Early in the process, Alejandro Ronceria told me that *PML* was not organized around bodies, but around light. After getting over my initial disappointment in the darkness and distortion of the VHS recording, I could recognize the brilliance of Highway's light choreography. But it took me much longer to

[3] While these concepts can be found throughout the book, they are well summarized in the Introduction. For further reading I recommend chapters 39-41 related to Greyson's video opera *Fig Trees* (Longfellow 2013; Ndodana-Breen 2013; Wall 2013).

recognize how that work with light was also queering perception itself. Jim Plaxton's lighting design, rooted in Nikolais' abstraction and Delany's speculative aesthetics, made light itself a queer agent—one that fractured vision, denied clarity, and produced layered perception.

That evolving understanding didn't happen all at once—and it wasn't always reflected in how I approached the project. When I conducted interviews, my grasp of queerness in the work was still developing. Although I had officially started the reading course designed with John Greyson and Brenda Longfellow ("Male Queerness and Imagining the Future in Prism, Mirror, Lens"), I had not yet completed it when I began conducting interviews. The pandemic made it difficult to focus—I was barely managing my two required courses after everything moved online. I did not yet understand how queerness operated within this work, or what questions needed to be asked. I was focused on whether collaborators were familiar with Delany's *Dhalgren* instead of on how René's queerness lived within the performance itself. While very informative on other topics, none of the formal interviews produced insights about queerness. What I did learn came later, through other conversations, after my understanding began to shift.

I came to see queerness not as a theme to be captured, but as a method—a way of working with light, structure, and refusal that pushes against clarity and fixed meaning. That method is grounded in speculative survival, as articulated by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Janelle Monáe, and Kara Keeling. Gumbs reminds us that survival itself is non-linear—a layered, cosmic act that resists erasure through complexity (2018). Monáe's work imagines apocalyptic futures that hold space for joy, refusal, and queer survival on our own terms (2018). Keeling insists on envisioning futures for those deliberately excluded from dominant narratives, where survival is not granted but created (2019). Speculative survival is a refusal to disappear. It lives through strategies of fragmentation, disorientation, and layered perception—this is how the work

survives, how it carries memory, how it insists on Indigenous queer futures in a world that does not want us to exist.

### 7.1.3 Indigenous Queer Futures

Crucially, this insistence on Indigenous queer futures is a central and vibrant aspect of Indigenous Futurisms. This field not only envisions decolonial futures but actively centres Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer experiences as fundamental to Indigenous resurgence and self-determination. The concept of speculative survival, with its emphasis on fragmentation, refusal, and queer futures finds powerful resonance here. For instance, Erica Violet Lee's "Reconciling in the Apocalypse" demonstrates how Indigenous refusal of colonial narratives is a foundational act of future-making that inherently includes all Indigenous peoples (2016). Jolene Rickard's visual sovereignty acts as a means for all Indigenous identities to assert their presence against narratives of disappearance (1995). Zoe Todd's "Indigenizing the Anthropocene" challenges colonial frameworks by privileging Indigenous epistemologies that historically embraced diverse gender and sexual identities (2015). And most directly, Jas Morgan's analysis of "Visual Cultures of Indigenous Futurisms" explicitly highlights how queer Indigenous artists use speculative aesthetics to foreground Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer embodiment, transforming the very methods of artistic creation into acts of decolonial and queer futurity (2016). These scholars and artists collectively illustrate how the method of queerness is not just present, but vital to the speculative survival envisioned by Indigenous Futurisms.

## 7.2 Archival Adaptation: Embodied Knowledge Beyond the Stage

My own project was ultimately shaped by the need for speculative survival when public health restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a radical shift in my original filmmaking plan. Initially, I envisioned a live dance film incorporating archival material—one

where the camera served as an embodied "dance partner" in the spirit of Maya Deren. Deren saw the camera not merely as a recorder but as a choreographic collaborator. I had imagined filming new sequences in urban and land-based spaces, reinterpreting Highway's choreography in conversation with environment and queerness as movement through space.

That plan became impossible. Public health restrictions and the disbanding of creative teams forced me to pivot entirely to archival footage and newly conducted interviews. This pivot became not a failure, but a philosophical and aesthetic turning point. It also marked the beginning of my collaboration with Sonya Mwambu, a queer experimental filmmaker and editor whose inherent understanding of multiplicity and legibility deeply informed the editing process. Sonya's presence carried forward the insights from 6.1, where I grappled with Highway's refusal of fixed identities and the queerness embedded in abstraction. Their intuitive knowledge of queer aesthetics shaped how we approached the material, particularly in crafting layered, multi-perspective compositions that resisted singular meaning.

In this new approach, I embraced the editing suite as my rehearsal space—a site for rhythm, movement, and resonance through montage, layering, and juxtaposition. The degraded VHS footage of *PML* became material, not obstacle—its imperfections embraced, its flickering lines layered with phytograms and other textures. Phil Hoffman's invitation to "embrace the imperfections" became a guiding principle, helping me to reject the colonial legacy of perfectionism (Findlay 2023).

Throughout my MFA, layers became a central part of my film work. I explored Jack Chambers' concept of Perceptualism—when art engages the senses and consciousness on a deep level, culminating in a flash of understanding (Smart 2000). Chambers' work encouraged me to explore how visual complexity and layered perception can create space for those moments of

recognition. I saw connections to Maya Deren's exploration of a single moment or "vertical axis" in film, and to Samuel R. Delany's assertion that "nothing we look at is ever seen without some shift and flicker... but the solid reality is the illusion: the shift and the flicker is all there is" (Barbour 2021). The degraded VHS, layered phytograms, and archival fragments all became part of this flickering visual field—a speculative space where knowledge emerged not from clarity, but from multiplicity.

The phytogram overlays activated the dark recordings in unexpected ways, adding another form of "playing with light" on top of the projections used in the original stage piece. The phytogram also introduced new shapes that complemented the artefacts created by the degrading VHS tape, making the imperfections feel intentional—an improvisational interplay that Phil Hoffman likened to jazz: the VHS tracking lines as treble, the phytogram as bass (email message to author, May 5, 2020).

The optic chain re-emerged here too, as I layered interviews, archival documents, lighting effects, and projections to create a multi-voiced visual field. The cutting room became a new kind of queer space—one where movement was conjured rather than captured. Without being able to speak to Highway directly, I relied on the stories of *PML* collaborators Alejandro Ronceria, Marsha Coffey, and Jim Plaxton, and essential memory keepers like Micah Barnes and Raoul Trujillo. Their recollections did not merely supplement the archival footage, they animated it. In relationship with these witnesses, re-storying brought the archival fragments into motion—animating them into a new whole that is layered, alive, and held in relation.

This approach resonates with Raoul Trujillo's reflections on memory and artistic practice when he reminds us that "memory is an elevated state of being, and remembering is the action" (1991). He describes memory as an acquired technique—a discipline artists must develop, like

dancers training their bodies—because “it is really the only lasting proof that greatness was ever achieved” (1991). For Trujillo, Highway’s work embodied this living memory: “There was no differentiation between the dream world and the waking world. Both were very real and equally as important” (1991). In this spirit, my engagement with the archive became less about static preservation and more about cultivating memory as an active, embodied, and speculative process—where the dream world of Highway’s vision continues to move and evolve beyond the stage.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

This project did not begin with clarity. It began with uncertainty, with speculative possibility—the idea that René Highway's *Prism, Mirror, Lens* could be reimagined through Indigenous Futurisms, dance, and film. But engaging with Highway's work revealed how that clarity resists being fixed. His choreography troubles dominant readings of queerness not through overt representation, but through layered abstraction, fractured narratives, and refusal of easy interpretation. In so doing, Highway's work demands a different kind of responsibility—one grounded in relationship, memory, and the ethical complexities of representing his vision across time and medium.

This process revealed practical and aesthetic lessons inseparable from my evolving method. What began as a project rooted in live, land-based choreography transformed into an archival, layered, and speculative practice. Choreography shifted into the edit suite. Interviews with Highway's collaborators became integral to the film itself, activating memory as embodied knowledge beyond the stage. Working with degraded VHS footage and embracing imperfection through phytograms and experimental layering fundamentally reshaped how I understood light, rhythm, and movement on screen. Editing became an act of choreography—a process of composing rhythm, dissonance, and layered perception through archival materials and speculative method.

These practical lessons were inseparable from the larger philosophical and ethical responsibilities of working within absence, distortion, and fragmented archives. Following the insights of Phil Hoffman, Jack Chambers, Maya Deren, and Samuel Delany, I came to understand that a different kind of knowledge emerges not from clarity, but from flicker,

multiplicity, and refusal of singular meaning. In this way, Highway's work, and this film, insist on queerness as method—a refusal of fixed narratives and a space for speculative survival.

Ultimately, this project contributes to Indigenous Futurisms—not as abstract ideals, but as living, embodied, evolving practices. Highway's vision, shaped by his collaborators, his cultural grounding, and his queerness, continues to reverberate in these layered acts of remembering and re-storying. My film and this thesis are not conclusions—they are invitations to continue imagining Indigenous queer futures as layered, resistant, and alive.

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