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The Creation of the *zagimekwe* (Mosquito-Lady): David Cronenberg's *Rabid* as an Inadvertent Anishinaabe Creation Story

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Preface: The new bird in the community – an Anishinaabe story

The Elders were talking about a new black bird in the community. One Elder saw it early in the Spring, the same time as the *apichi* (robin). Another Elder saw the new bird before the ice was off the lake. Another Elder said the bird was in the garden last year and they did not know what type of bird it was. All of the Elders were concerned. How is there a new bird in our community? Where did the bird come from? It acted the same as wild birds, so it was not someone's pet. But how did our community get a new bird? Have we never seen this bird before? Do we have stories about this bird?

One day, during the Elder Sharing Circle, the bird happened to be outside. All of the Elders got excited and rushed outside to see the bird. It was true, it was a new bird. We have never seen this bird before, said the Elders. It cannot be a bird from around here because we don't have stories for it. But it acts like the other birds, so it must be a bird, and we must have a name for it. The Elders came to agreement—it was a new bird, we did not have a name for it, we did not have stories for the bird and it has only been around for the past few summers. The Elders were still perplexed; how could there be a new bird here?

The Elders quickly came to another agreement—they needed to watch the bird to try to learn about the bird. So, for the whole summer, the Elders watched the bird. It ate the same foods as the other birds, there did not seem to be a lot of these birds around, but this black bird seemed to act like other birds. It definitely was not *gaagaagi* (raven) or *aandeg* (crow). Nor was it like *asiginaak* (red-wing black bird) but it was similar to the *ashawenaniisi* (grackle). The Elders kept watch but could never figure out this new bird. One Elder said this is how you know our world is changing. There are new birds. There are animals in our community without stories. Eventually an Elder said: we shall watch the bird for more seasons and perhaps we will get its name from its actions, like our

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other birds. And so, the community waits, watches and the bird still does not have a name.

Introduction

Rabid is a seminal work in filmmaker David Cronenberg's career, typifying his exploration of body horror and his enduring fascination with the intersections of technology, biology, and human identity. I am interested in how a Norval Morrisseau painting—seen within the first two minutes of the film—invites an Indigenous interpretation that emphasizes the interconnectedness of the natural world. This paper offers an Anishinaabe reading of *Rabid*, centering on the epistemological framework of interconnectedness and relationality from Anishinaabe cosmologies. I aim to reframe Rose's post-surgical transformation not as a monstrous aberration but as the emergence of a new ontological category—one that highlights Anishinaabe understandings of the relationships between humans, animals, and other-than-human beings as a lens for reimagining horror. If Rose is no longer fully human, within Anishinaabe frameworks, she can be read as a *manitou* (spirit being), or as a *zagimekwe* (mosquito-lady), a human-animal-spirit hybrid. Since Anishinaabe teachings accommodate the existence of such hybrids, how might we interpret the contagion Rose spreads—not merely as viral infection but, possibly, as a spiritual or ontological transmission that challenges settler definitions of humanity? Ultimately, this paper explores how the horror of *Rabid*, when read through an Anishinaabe epistemology, becomes reframed, invested with new understanding.

Released in 1977, *Rabid* is a Canadian horror film written and directed by Cronenberg. It follows the story of Rose (Marilyn Chambers), a young woman who undergoes experimental plastic surgery after a devastating motorcycle accident. The procedure unexpectedly results in a grotesque transformation, giving her a mutated orifice under her armpit that conceals a proboscis-like appendage. This new appendage drives Rose to feed on human blood; as she hitchhikes back to the city from the countryside, she succumbs to her new hunger and infects multiple victims with an infectious virus through the proboscis. Though Rose's appearance remains conventionally attractive, her victims transform into frenzied, rabid, zombie-like creatures who then start attacking others in public spaces such as the subway and shopping malls. Chaos

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engulfs the city, turning it into a landscape of uncontrollable violence and contagion.

Figure 1: Morrisseau's *Looking North* features in the background early in *Rabid* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1977 Cinepix / New World Pictures).

A brief but significant moment occurs near the beginning of the film, when the painting *Looking North* by renowned Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau appears in the background—an image that quietly invites seeing the narrative through an Indigenous interpretive lens (Figure 1). The Anishinaabeg (plural of Anishinaabe), also referred to as Ojibwe, are one of the biggest Indigenous groups, with ancestral lands extending throughout the Great Lakes region in present-day Canada and the United States. Morrisseau was a groundbreaking Anishinaabe artist and "Canada's first Indigenous art star" (Robertson, 2016, 4). Morrisseau is respected as a pioneer who catalyzed the artistic movement known as the Woodland School and is recognized as a pivotal figure within the Indian Group of Seven, a collective of Indigenous artists who challenged the marginalization of Indigenous art in Canada by asserting its place within contemporary art movements, as well as asserting Indigenous cultural sovereignty through visual expression. His work is important because it incorporates Anishinaabeg spiritual and cosmological knowledge into modern visual art, for example by using images from personal vision quests and the ceremonial motifs seen in sacred rock paintings. Anishinaabeg ways of knowing stress how people, animals, spirits, and the land are all linked, mirrored by

Morrisseau's vivid colours, strong black lines, and segmented interior forms, which produce an almost x-ray–like aesthetic that conveys these deep interconnections. Due to the presence of *Looking North*, Rose's journey of transformation can be interpreted as a part of a larger spiritual story, which mirrors the Anishinaabeg perspectives on adaptability and the interconnectedness of the human and non-human realms.

When applied to settler media forms, Indigenous perspectives allow for a narrative reclaiming, whereby Indigenous knowledge systems can provide richer, more nuanced interpretations of identity and belonging. In the case of *Rabid*, an Anishinaabeg reading reclaims the narrative by suggesting that Rose's transformation should not be met with fear and violence but with careful observation and patience—principles that could offer pathways to understanding rather than death and destruction. *Rabid* inadvertently narrates a *zagimekwe* creation story, a figure that aligns with Anishinaabe teachings of observation, interconnectedness, and acceptance. Rather than being dismissed as monstrous, such a being might be seen as part of a broader web of relationships and transformations.

Furthermore, this perspective opens the door to an Indigenous approach to film in general, offering a unique interpretive lens that frames cinematic narratives through Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies. Similar to how scholars have noted that queer- or black-coded characters do not necessarily have to perfectly exhibit queerness or blackness respectively to be considered relevant to these forms of minority experience (Kim 2017), Indigenous-coded characters also do not have to involve direct representations of Indigeneity. This paper suggests that we might begin to identify Indigenous-coded media as that which echoes Indigenous values, teachings, and ways of understanding the world, without necessarily being overtly about Indigenous people or issues. The horror genre is uniquely well-suited to Indigenous coding because of its liminal nature: it dwells between the visible and invisible, the real and the spectral, the known and the unknowable. Horror's reliance on sensation, affect, and embodiment resonates with Indigenous epistemologies that emphasize knowledge as relational, felt, and experiential. The genre's capacity to visualize what is often unseen or unspeakable, such as trauma, transformation, or the presence of spirits, aligns with Indigenous ways of understanding the porous boundaries between human, non-human, and spirit worlds. Horror becomes a generative space for Indigenous coding, where Indigenous knowledges can reanimate the narrative and symbolic terrain of film and, in the process, unsettle settler dominance over story-telling and its logics.

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The Creation of New Rose

Following Rose's motorcycle accident, she undergoes a plastic-surgery technique that is "a little out of the ordinary" at a clinic conveniently a stone's throw from the accident site. Despite the procedure's risks, the attending surgeon, Doctor Keloid, deems it necessary. He bleakly observes, "She's got nothing to lose. Literally." Doctor Keloid thus begins the surgery that is, at best, experimental. The procedure uses "neutral field grafts"—a novel skin-grafting technique that "treats the graft so that they become morphogenetically neutral." In this process, the tissue becomes adaptable, meaning it can be grafted anywhere on the body. The grafts, in Rose's case taken from her thigh, "wouldn't just be thigh skin with the color and texture of thigh skin—[they] would actually develop as facial tissue" once grafted onto the face. As Doctor Keloid explains, "neutral field tissue has the same ability to form any part of the human body that the tissue of a human embryo has." However, the risks are substantial and potentially dangerous, with one character warning that these neutral field grafts could result in "terminal cancer" or "the possibility that carcinomas will form."

Doctor Keloid is proposing that the body can be made modular. Body parts can be substituted like components in a machine, without consequence or consideration of the body parts' deeper relational or symbolic significance. Yet his fantasy of somatic neutrality, the belief that bodily matter, like skin or organs, is interchangeable, universal, and without inherent meaning, ultimately collapses. His assumption that these tissues could be transferred without altering a person's identity or relationship to the world is undone by the horror of unintended transformation and the emergence of an unanticipated ontology: a new being that he neither predicted nor fully understands. (And for Rose, these skin grafts result in the emergence of a transformed self—a "New Rose"––that defies containment.) Instead, *Rabid* in fact reveals that the body is not inert or neutral but affectively and ontologically charged: alive with meanings, reactions, and relationships that exceed current understandings.

Upon awakening from the procedure, New Rose is thrashing around, disoriented and comforted by a fellow patient, Walsh. Before she can comprehend what is happening, a proboscis-like appendage, hidden beneath her armpit, emerges and attacks Walsh. He remarks, "I think I cut myself or something. Is that a knife or something in there with you," to which New Rose does not verbally respond. Instead, the appendage pierces his skin and drains his blood. This new organ causes New Rose no pain; rather, it appears as an

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integrated extension of her body—an alien yet naturalized part of her physiology. The proboscis serves a singular purpose: to sustain New Rose by piercing the skin of others and consuming their blood. Despite the grotesque nature of this transformation, New Rose's actions remain driven by a primal need rather than malicious intent. Throughout the film, she does not exhibit irrational violence; instead, she uses the proboscis only when hunger compels her. One of the most unsettling aspects of her transformation is how composed New Rose remains throughout, even when feeding. Her demeanor is calm, almost serene, as she wanders the city unnoticed, mirroring a normal human, even as she begins to unknowingly infect others.

New Rose doesn't become monstrous in the traditional sense; she doesn't snarl or convulse or visibly decay. In one scene, she reacts with genuine horror at the outbreak of infected rabid people and their violence towards others in a mall, and she is unable to comprehend her role in the chaos. This composure is precisely what makes her so disturbing; she does not *appear* to be a threat, and more importantly, she doesn't *feel* like one to herself. She retains her subjectivity and self-image even as her body becomes a vector of contagion. What we might call her humanity remains intact, and this blurs the lines between the human and the monstrous, challenging the traditional notion of monstrosity often associated with blood sucking and weird body additives after experimental surgery. The technological intervention doesn't erase Rose's humanity but mutates it, encouraging compelling questions about identity and adaptation. If New Rose's humanity remains visible despite her mutation, what does this suggest about the limitations of defining monstrosity through appearance alone? Further, if monstrosity and humanity can coexist within New Rose, does this destabilize the very binary of human/monster? Can we consider mutation not as loss but as an emergent form of being—one that unsettles the boundaries of identity, embodiment, and other-than-human spirit?

Her humanity, then, becomes a site of tension. Her conventional beauty and ability to pass as non-infected appear to preserve her legibility within a Western framework of what counts as human—desirability, recognizability, and social acceptance. This positioning exposes the fragility of humanity itself. Is humanity determined by outward appearance and, in this case, the ability to deceive the gaze? The film never resolves this tension, leaving Rose suspended between human and monstrous, familiar and alien.

Even though the film never answers this directly, it stages the question of Rose's monstrosity in such a way that it forces the viewer to reckon with blurred boundaries. Technological intervention here is not simply invasive or transformative—it's generative. It brings something new: not fully monstrous,

not fully human, but something in-between. New Rose becomes an unknowable hybrid, not only biologically but affectively and ethically. The horror lies not in her losing her humanity, but in how much of it she seems to retain while becoming something else entirely. The film thus invites us to consider how humanity might persist, uncomfortably, within technologized forms—posing the unsettling idea that adaptation might not mean transformation *away* from the human but a strange and incomplete *reconfiguration* of it.

From an Anishinaabeg perspective, such changes call not for immediate control or explanation, but for careful observation and patience, allowing the full significance of these transformations to unfold in their own time. New Rose's calm demeanor resonates with these Anishinaabeg understandings of relationality and the importance of careful observation before judgment. In Anishinaabe thought, beings are not understood solely through their outward appearance or immediate actions but through their relationships and behaviours over long periods of time. This principle emphasizes patience and observation as necessary to discern the true nature of someone or something—especially when that being resists easy categorization. New Rose, in her altered state, embodies this ambiguity, and from an Anishinaabe perspective, it renders her neither evil nor inhuman; as a hybrid being, she invites a slower, more relational reading of her transformation. Her transformation is not simply to be feared or eradicated but observed, contextualized, and understood through the web of relations she affects and is affected by.

It is in the context of these signals that Anishinaabe observation, rooted in an overarching understanding of interconnection, offers a unique lens through which to interpret New Rose's transformation. Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence Gross notes that Anishinaabe myths emphasize the importance of "[seeking] out the unfamiliar" as a way to gain deeper insight into the world, embracing the unknown rather than fearing it (2002, 446). This approach encourages careful observation, not only of a being's outward appearance but also its behaviour and interactions within the community. When encountering a new presence such as New Rose, Anishinaabe ways of knowing remind us that understanding takes time, much like the bird story I provided in the preface.

One element of *Rabid* that resonates with the Anishinaabeg values of patience and attentiveness is the way the film moves between two temporal registers. On one hand, there is New Rose's quiet, often slow wandering through urban and suburban landscapes—a mostly calm, non-descript rhythm. On the other, there is the rapid escalation of the viral outbreak she unknowingly spreads, with her victims chasing, lunging, and violently attacking others. New Rose is never directly confronted with the consequences of the infection she

spreads, remaining unaware that her consumption of human blood is the catalyst for her victims' violent transformations. Instead, she continues to move through the city untouched by suspicion, observing the growing chaos as though she were a passive onlooker rather than its origin, especially in the aforementioned mall scene. These are the film's slower, atmospheric scenes that ask the viewer to attune themselves to subtler shifts—to observe New Rose in her body, environments, and moods rather than via her actions. This aligns with Anishinaabeg modes of observation, which emphasize watching for what cannot be immediately seen, named, or understood. New Rose's blood-sucking appendage remains hidden from view, but an Anishinaabe approach, rooted in patience, careful attention, and openness to the unfamiliar, would prioritize understanding her relationally and as a whole being, an emergent being—one that may reveal a deeper purpose within the interconnected web of existence.

In contrast, New Rose's victims embody the opposite of this careful, relational approach. The infected appear human yet are deeply unsettling—sweaty, disoriented, and foaming at the mouth, with bloodshot eyes and twitchy, aggressive movements. They move rapidly through urban spaces, and their behaviours are triggered by stimuli such as sudden noises, crowds, and proximity, leaving little room for calm observation. Yet from an Anishinaabe perspective, even these beings might be approached with a broad and nonjudgmental curiosity instead of fear. Truly seeing them, instead of reacting to them, would require slowing down and resisting the impulse to categorize them as purely monstrous, something the film implicitly encourages.

As Gross notes, Anishinaabeg teachings promote "a high tolerance for disorder," which challenges the dominant impulse to impose order, control, or rigid categorization in the face of uncertainty or disruption (2002, 444). This tolerance is not rooted in passivity but rather in a relational attentiveness that values the unfolding of meaning over time. Moreover, "the ethics presented in Anishinaabe myths are usually situational in nature," meaning that the right course of action is determined not by fixed rules but by responsiveness to the specific dynamics of a given moment (447). Together, these principles foster an adaptive and divergent approach to understanding complex situations—one that is especially vital in navigating the uncanny, shifting realities of *Rabid*.

This observation connects to the understanding that everyone and everything has "a spirit, heart, mind, and body and therefore connects, feels, thinks, and acts" (Bell 2016, 7); this "leads to respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility as the individual lives on the planet with all other living things" (16). An Anishinaabe-informed lens encourages longer-term observation, receptivity, and ethical flexibility—yes, even in the face of zombie-

like creatures. These qualities open the possibility for deeper insight into both New Rose and the infected victims, who are too easily cast as monstrous or expendable.

Further, the film never goes deep enough into the new nature of these victims. Yes, they are zombie-like, flesh-eating humans who seem to attack at random, but what, outside of being infected by New Rose, is causing their hunger? Are they even hungry? Perhaps they are scared and lack defensive mechanisms outside of biting people. Further, if we think back to the Norval Morrisseau painting, perhaps they are interconnected within the world, just not in a way that is currently in view, which gestures toward the need for observation and understanding rather than quick dismissal.

By situating New Rose's evolution within an Indigenous worldview, her transformation into a mosquito-human hybrid becomes more than a body horror trope. Instead, it invites a rethinking of monstrosity not as a deviation from the norm but as a relational signal, a presence that demands ethical engagement and reflection rather than destruction, which has interesting implications for monster theory. It opens possibilities for viewing so-called "monsters" as beings who emerge in response to imbalance, trauma, or disruption. There could be a whole new category of entities that carry teachings and warnings, reflect ruptured relationships with the land, and serve as reminders for relational obligations. Could an Anishinaabe perspective on the mosquito allow us to better understand New Rose? More importantly, could this perspective help New Rose herself in coming to terms with her own evolving identity as a mosquito-human hybrid? Furthermore, how might the Anishinaabe worldview of interconnectedness transform *Rabid* from body horror to a creation story? New Rose's transformation into a human-mosquito hybrid prompts reflection on whether she represents a new form of *manitou*—a being that transcends the human-non-human divide. As Anishinaabe teachings suggest, "communities recognized persons with special connections to manitou power" (Miller 2010, 179), raising the possibility that New Rose would not be seen as a threat but rather as someone uniquely attuned to the spirit world of the *zagime*. There are subtle yet revealing clues that align her transformation with the characteristics of a *zagime*. Her actions mirror those of the mosquito—feeding on blood to sustain herself—and she physically embodies mosquito-like traits with her proboscis-like appendage that functions in a similar way to that of a female mosquito.

The mosquito's impact should not be underestimated. Even in everyday life, the incessant itching, swelling, and irritation produced by a single bite can be maddening. This raises the question of what, exactly, New Rose's bite does

to her victims beyond the visible, external transformations. The film emphasizes the grotesque outward mutations, yet it neglects the interior bodily disruptions that such an encounter might produce. New Rose's bite may likewise unsettle the inner workings of the body in ways that remain unarticulated, yet no less significant. But even without the internal workings of the infected, the effects of New Rose's bite closely parallel those of real mosquitoes, as her victims become infected with a disease, much like the way mosquitoes can transmit viruses such as zika, West Nile, chikungunya, dengue, and malaria.

New Rose and the virus she inadvertently spread serve as metaphors for the unforeseen outcomes that arise when humanity attempts to manipulate natural systems without fully understanding their complexity. The experimental surgery that transforms her can be seen as an effort to exert control over nature—an effort that ultimately disrupts the interconnected web of life, leading to widespread consequences for both the human and non-human world.

However, this interpretation still operates within a colonized, non-Anishinaabe perspective that views New Rose as a monstrous creation. From an Anishinaabe lens, the core teaching of the "necessity of respecting all life, from the smallest insects on up" offers a more compassionate and nuanced response (Gross 2002, 19). Anishinaabe "teachings emphasize the value of treating…other human beings with respect"(Fontaine and McCaskill 2022, 229), and this respect extends even to those who, like New Rose, possess sharp armpit appendages and an unusual proclivity for consuming blood—keeping in mind that "Indigenous traditions generally don't limit the category of person solely to the human" (Justice 2018, 37).

Through this lens, New Rose's existence becomes an opportunity for learning and relationship building. Instead of responding with violence, Anishinaabeg approaches would consider how her presence fits within the broader balance of life and what spiritual evolution lessons she might bring from the *manitou* realm. Anishinaabeg beliefs about *manitou* encompass a profound understanding of existence that extends beyond the physical world of rock, fire, water, air, wood, and flesh. *Manitou* "refers to realities other than the physical ones… to the unseen realities of individual beings and places and events that are beyond human understanding but are still clearly real" (Miller 2010, 7). The Anishinaabeg concept of *manitou* is nuanced and often difficult for non-Anishinaabe people to grasp. As one teaching suggests, "understanding this way of seeing begins with a person's willingness to accept that it exists" (Dumont 1992, 75). These beliefs about the presence of other-than-human spirits would allow Anishinaabeg to be more inclined to recognize and accept New Rose as a *manitou*-infused hybrid spirit person rather than as an abomination. Could it be

that, rather than being a medical anomaly or a technological failure, New Rose was created by the *manitou* world to bring balance or convey a message to humanity? Is this her creation story—one rooted in the necessity of a message from the *manitou* world? Posing such a question reorients the narrative away from fear and the Western fixation on monstrosity and instead toward possibilities of acceptance. After all, within Anishinaabe cosmologies, *manitous* are integral agents of balance, harmony, and relational accountability.

This relational approach reframes the film's horror. New Rose is not a predator by intent but a symptom of a deeper disturbance—her violence is affective, she only infects when she feeds, and it is not personal. An Anishinaabe reading would urge us to see her not as a monster but as a signal of disrupted balance, of neglected kinship, and of the need to look beyond appearances to understand the full weight of our interconnections.

Horror as a genre often cultivates and relies on immediate panic response to the new and unknown, equating unfamiliarity with danger. The assumption is that encountering the unfamiliar must trigger fear, violence, or destruction, which, in turn, constructs the Other as monstrous. The logics of Western horror cinema thrives on immediacy, on the shock of the jump scare, the fleeting glimpse of the monstrous, the camera's refusal to linger long enough to understand what one is seeing. The genre is invested in fear as spectacle—not relation as pedagogy.

To suggest that these manitou-spirit hybrid beings require patient attention unsettles the foundational mechanics of horror itself: it calls for a slowing down, a willingness to sit with ambiguity, and an instinct to connect with rather than destroy or contain what is perceived as threatening. An Indigenous reading does not simply reinterpret horror tropes but fundamentally exposes the genre's impoverishment. Where horror cultivates estrangement, Indigenous epistemologies insist on relationality—even with that which unsettles us. The critical point here is not to redeem the infected beings within horror's limited framework but to highlight how the genre's refusal of patience forecloses the very possibility of understanding and learning that Indigenous approaches demand.

Yet reflexive Western panic reveals something more unsettling than the figure of the so-called monster itself: it is the Western compulsion to eradicate difference that becomes truly monstrous. This is, however, a distinctly Western epistemology of alterity, one that frames difference as a threat to be managed or eliminated. From an Indigenous perspective, such a response is not inevitable: a person can choose to not respond to the unfamiliar with panic or violence. Instead, new presences can demand patience, for they might be

carrying teachings, including regarding how to expand relational understandings of life. The refusal to immediately condemn or correct what appears unfamiliar reflects an Indigenous ethos of respect for transformation. This way of knowing invites viewers to resist the film's dominant panic and instead consider how New Rose and her victims might be understood within a broader ecology of change, kinship, and becoming. By contrasting these epistemologies, the film's dynamics underscore the possibility of rethinking what is monstrous—not the presence of the Other, but the unexamined fear that Western frameworks condition us to perform.

But it is important to acknowledge the limits of this interpretive move. I am applying an Indigenous framework to a Western horror film that was never designed to carry such relational meaning. To gloss over this tension would risk collapsing Indigenous cosmologies into a genre structured by colonial logics. Horror as a form has long relied on the trope of the "monstrous other," a figure that encodes racial, cultural, and gendered anxieties through fear and abjection. This very structure is antithetical to Indigenous epistemologies, which refuse the dehumanization of difference and instead emphasize responsibility, kinship, and transformation. Being honest about these interpretive boundaries matters because it interrupts the colonial tendency to appropriate Indigenous concepts as a form of academic novelty. Acknowledging the distance between the genre's intentions and an Anishinaabe re-reading is not a weakness but a methodological strength—it allows the critique to expose how thin and impoverished Western horror conventions are when compared to the depth, relationality, and ethical orientation of Indigenous storyworlds. This interpretation challenges the Western horror trope of the monstrous other and offers a reclamation of New Rose's story, as well as her victims', through Indigenous perspectives—ones that value transformation as an extension of relationality rather than a deviation from it. Indigenous coding can be understood as a theorization of trace: the presence of something that endures even when obscured or distorted by its container, whether that be genre, narrative form, or colonial discourse. Indigenous re-coding and reinterpretation surfaces when transformation—so often cast in Western frameworks as a monstrous deviation from humanity—is reinterpreted as an extension of relationality. In *Rabid*, Rose's mutation need not be read as a loss of her humanity but as a shifting continuity, one that holds traces of her connections to others, including those marked as her victims. Such a reading challenges the Western horror trope of the monstrous other and reclaims New Rose's story through an Indigenous lens—one that codes change not as rupture, but as persistence and ongoing, relational transformation.

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A clear example of this new kind of persistence and what it means for the world appears when New Rose first attempts to feast on a cow. She tries feasting, fails, and gets sick from trying to drink the cow's blood. The cow is a deeply technologized creature, produced through centuries of selective breeding and domestication. Once introduced to North America, the anishinaabeg choose to describe this type of farm animal as *awakaan* meaning captive or slave. Anishinaabe people see farm animals as slaves to their owners and without a choice or freewill to move with agency in the world. Cows are not permitted to have any meaningful life beyond the confines of a small pen or fenced-in yard. Their movements, reproduction, and daily rhythms are tightly controlled, leaving them with little autonomy. They exist almost entirely within human-designed systems that prioritize efficiency over the animal's natural behaviours and needs. This lack of agency for the cow is antithetical to anishinaabeg worldviews. For anishinaabeg "equality figures greatly, usually in the guise of the need for humans to respect all animals," and it is this Anishinaabe belief that emphasizes the interconnectedness and equality of all living beings. Moreover, in these beliefs, it is important to always recognize the spirit or essence present in animals, plants, and other elements of the natural world. This understanding often leads to a deep respect for animals and the environment, which can manifest in different cultural practices, rituals, and ways of living in harmony with nature.

In contrast, settler-colonial ideals and practices, rooted in Western European traditions, often prioritize the exploitation of natural resources and the domestication of animals for human benefit. This perspective leads to the overall treatment of animals, farm animals especially, as commodities, rather than as beings with their own inherent value and connections to the broader web of life. Given these differences in worldview, Anishinaabe people view the treatment of farm animals in settler colonial societies as a form of subjugation or domination, rather than respecting the animals' inherent worth and interconnectedness.

It is easy to understand how from an anishinaabe perspective, New Rose, whose change comes from a highly technologized surgery and the cow, a highly technologized animal, are similar if not almost the same. New Rose has a visceral reaction against the blood of an animal that bears resemblance with her own new nature. By noticing how both bodies—New Rose's and the cow's—are shaped by external technological forces, we can better understand how New Rose's transformation exposes the limits of settler-colonial knowledge systems and their attempts to regulate the spiritual and the material.

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The Indigenous-coded figure of New Rose acts as a challenge to dominant ways of thinking and seeing, serving "to index the failures of modern society—in particular civilized society's lost ability to perceive and interact with the spiritual world" (Simmons 2025, 325). Although the film is made within settler-colonial systems of representation, it creates an unstable space where Indigenous knowledge cannot be fully controlled or erased. Instead, this knowledge returns like a spectral surplus, haunting and interrupting modernity's refusal to acknowledge the unseen spirit realm.

New Rose's creation story can be viewed not as a grotesque aberration but as a cautionary tale that reflects the consequences of disrupting the delicate balance of nature. This approach disrupts the binaries of human-nonhuman, civilized-wild, and even life-death, which underpins much of Western horror's logic. The "monster" ceases to be an aberration at the margins of the story and becomes a teacher, a relation, or a mirror reflecting the responsibilities humans have neglected.

Exploring films like *Rabid* through Indigenous frameworks opens up new possibilities for storytelling and reading, ones that resist colonial narratives of monstrosity and instead embrace transformation, adaptation, and relationality. New Rose's evolution becomes an example of what happens when relations are ignored and when patient observation is replaced with fear. Indigenous coding of media presents an opportunity to see beyond surface-level horror and engage with stories that acknowledge the complexity and interconnectedness of existence. Such an approach not only enriches our understanding of cinematic works but also asserts the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems in broader cultural dialogue.

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