

Trans-Iterating Residential School Experiences:

Modelling Reconciliation in

Tomson Highway's Kiss of the Fur Queen

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Tomson Highway has repeated in a number of interviews that the novel, Kiss of the Fur Queen, was initially ‘conceived of’ or imagined in Cree, and only in the writing, did he ‘translate’ the experience into English. Using key features and knowledge from each language, as well as aspects of Western narrative form, Highway takes his narrative beyond the boundaries of either language, mapping the experiential terrain which neither tongue can express alone: he effectively creates a literary Métis-space. Written in what Jacques Derrida’s has dubbed the era of apology (28), Highway’s novel can be viewed as an act of redress: revisiting the personal experience of the violence of residential schools and resituating it within the linguistic realm. Highway’s narrative attempts to give voice to the yet-unexpressed spaces between the linguistic and cultural nationalities of Native language domains and English. He creates a literary cartography of encounter and assimilation, for his reader. He complicates signifiers through the duality of his identity as a Cree-speaker within the hegemonic Canadian discourse. However, rather than isolating the ongoing violence of these experiences in a static historical moment, Highway reiterates them in the context of contemporary questions of Native identity and authenticity. Highway successfully enacts a re-writing of history—an anti-imperialist ‘translation’ of colonization (Krupat 164). At the same time he also engages with the present indigenous community of Canada, through his involvement in the current climate of community healing and governmentally administrated reconciliation. Despite its generative mode of communicating and re-addressing residential school traumas, by committing to complete disclosure—full expression and shameless articulation—Highway’s narrative aims a polemical blow against the limited reach of administrative efforts to reconcile the peoples affected by these issues.

Translation

Traditionally considered as a linguistic exchange, in which the translator is only seeking the closest equivalent, translation must be reconsidered in light of ‘Métis’ texts, or those produced by non-Western authors writing in English. As Anuradha Dingwaney points out, in addition to well-known ideas of translation,

translation is also the vehicle through which...cultures (are made to travel)—transported or ‘borne across’ to and recuperated by audiences in the West. Thus, even texts written in English or in one of the metropolitan languages, but originating in or about non-Western cultures, can be considered under the rubric of translation. (4)

Because economic power and imperial conquest insist that in order to enter into the global arena literature and text must be written in the dominant metropolitan languages, works that are written from or in a non-Western context can be considered translations that both comply with and contest that preference. They are translated from the author’s first language into the vernacular of the surrounding cultural dominant discourse. Arnold Krupat argues that because of this dynamic “it seems virtually impossible to speak of Native American literatures, both oral and written, without speaking about translation in the very many senses that the word has taken on” (164). Highway recognizes this organization of power and language: “When I want to make money, I speak English” (Marrow). Working within this exchange, Highway is writing, self-admittedly, under the rubric of translation. He must navigate the hegemonic discourse in order to write for mass publication. Therefore economic, political and cultural power relations shape the literary exchange that qualifies as translation.

For Highway, then, translation is not understood merely as the exchange of signifiers in the name of equivalence, but rather is a complex system of transcultural understanding, substitution, and residual meaning that necessarily risks inadequacy. As every signifier is arbitrary and composite, its meaning depends upon its cultural context. The job of the translator, then, includes an evaluation of the cultural content and resonance of a term or phrase and the complex equivocation of meaning that affords the same meaning and impression in the second signifying system. André Lefevere explains contextual translation well in his article “Composing the Other.” He draws a distinction between two “grids” of meaning in translation. The first is a “conceptual grid” and the second, a “textual grid” (Lefevere 76). The conceptual grid is the level on which the two texts must agree in content, theme, and effect. The textual grid is the level on which the two texts must agree linguistically. Lefevere insists “both grids are the result of the socialization process” (Lefevere 76). Socialization is rife with cultural referents (and what Lefevere calls, “markers”), which cue the “educated” reader to interact appropriately with the markers for the desired interpretive outcome. For translators, these two grids are difficult to reconcile, particularly given the cultural significance of the conceptual grid. This cultural content must be reflected as well as refracted in the translation, but is not represented, in either the original language or the translation, by simple signifiers alone; context is a dynamic literary factor.

Gayatri Spivak describes a similar concept in her discussion of catachresis, which she defines as “a word for which there is no adequate referent to be found” (298). Catachresis, in Spivak’s sense, denotes a concept that takes no adequate referent or sign. Spivak describes the catachrestic moment as an “originary ‘abuse,’ constitutive of language-production, where both

concept and metaphor are ‘wrested’ from their proper meaning” (298). In short, in the catachrestic moment the speaker/author begins at a loss and brings speech to the experience, populating the meaning of an impression with words and metaphors. Borrowed from their original referents and compiled to represent—albeit imprecisely—the unnamed thing/impression/word this catachrestic material makes a new thing available to the reader. It is interesting that Spivak defines the subject of catachresis as a word that must be expressed incorrectly. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism “presumes all perception, including the higher forms of it which we call thinking, is accomplished through sign operations” (Holquist 51). Thus, concepts, even when untethered to a known signifier, register in a signifying body as a ‘word.’ The concept, the perception of the experience, it must fit into the other operations transpiring in the signifying mind. Just so, in the catachrestic process, the mind not only substitutes a word or metaphor for the experience yet-unnamed, but the mind also presumes the name-ability of the yet-unnamed. Consciousness works towards coherence, ‘making sense’ all that is perceived. This process of finding language is slightly different in the context of translating, where the ‘yet-unnamed’ is ‘named,’ but only in one system. Catachresis is only taking place in the second signifying system, where the first system’s word is ‘yet-unnamed.’ This issue of the change of context expands the concept of catachresis, from that of a language-specific phenomenon, to that of being a property of all expression/ communication in which the catachrestic ‘word’ is more of a thread of meaning, which may find articulation, or expression in another signifying system altogether.

For the purposes of redress that this paper examines, in their explanation of the processes of representation, what Lefevere and Spivak are indicating is the challenge of representation and interpretation that both plagues and characterizes semiotic expression. In his discussion of the

conceptual and textual grids, Lefevere indicates the multivalent sites of meaning-production, all of which must be synthesized in the translator's mind and, more importantly, levelled and unified on the page. While Lefevere's model focuses on the translating process, Spivak draws attention to the ways in which all linguistic exchange can be characterized by the same challenges associated with translation. All language is, for Spivak, catachrestic, as it is all metaphoric and representative substitution. Spivak's argument is, therefore, highly relevant to the process of signifying and meaning-production that characterizes the lives of Highway's protagonists and the novel's very structure. The term 'catachresis' comes to represent, through implication, the leap from signified to the signifier, in the author and readers mind: the space between the content and its symbol that the speaker/writer/translator must shape in order to communicate meaning.

The Poetics of Testimony

In Kiss of the Fur Queen, the early years of the protagonists investigate the production of meaning in Jeremiah and Gabriel's lives. When Jeremiah begins to attend the residential school, his struggle with the new language reflects the cognitive politics and dynamics at the heart of the novel itself. More than once, he expresses his incapacity to speak English properly. This not only reflects that he is a new speaker, but also that he is alienated from the instinctual connections that a first-language speaker might make. When Jeremiah boards the small plane to return to the residential school in his second year, Father Lafleur makes a nonchalant comment about Jeremiah having brought his little brother this time around (70). This statement insinuates that Jeremiah has brought Gabriel of his own volition or initiative. Although he's not a native speaker of English and has spent the whole summer speaking Cree with his family, Jeremiah picks up on this connotation: " 'Yes,' piped up Jeremiah, in a tiny, humble voice. We didn't have much choice, he would have added, if the language had been his" (70). Evidently he has understood the

nuanced implication of the priest's statement. Therefore, arguably, he has a sufficient command of the language to respond accordingly. However, he chooses not to reply fully, stating the language is not his own. This is not to say that he does not understand the 'textual grid' of the statement and response, but, rather, that the 'conceptual' (and therefore cultural grid) and the place to say such a thing, does not belong to him, does not give him license to correct an adult authority figure. In many ways, Jeremiah's is a coerced response. It represents a partial 'no' for Jeremiah—a negation, a refusal, a conviction inexpressible by him in English. For the priest, the 'yes' is simply a 'yes,' an agreement with the implications of his statement/ solicitation. The notion of choice foregrounds the dynamics of power between the two figures. While there is discursive solidarity between the older brother, who might, if he could, speak for both brothers and the narrator adult who can retrospectively speak for all the abused in the narrative. The narrator's awareness of assimilation is in the play of codes from the outset. Jeremiah's deference implies that his actual position is altered by his linguistic, cultural difference; he is outside the grid.

The confusion generated in the cultural slippage between languages is well expressed in Jeremiah's instruction concerning the meaning of heaven and hell. Initially, without the necessary cultural currency, Jeremiah is afraid of God: "He was aiming a huge thunderbolt down at Earth and staring venomously... the word ["GOD"] loomed large and threatening; he felt the urge to rub it out" (59). Because he has not been fully instructed in Catholic piety, he does not know to identify with God. Rather, he recognizes the curmudgeonly appearance of the figure, and instinctively, he finds it threatening. Similarly, although heaven is depicted as being full of instruments, which appeal to him, he is put off by the fact that he does not see a single 'Indian' in the group of people flocking there (59). When he is presented with the concept of hell, he finds it

more appealing, and he notes that it is full of Indians: “hell looked more engaging. It was filled with tunnels, and Champion-Jeremiah had a great affection for tunnels... these people revelled shamelessly in various fun-looking activities” (60). Without the Catholic understanding of ‘shame’ as both a part of and a deterrent to inherent humanity, Jeremiah views the images of heaven and hell from a Cree perspective. Without the Christian hermeneutics to ‘read’ the biblical images, to Jeremiah, hell appears to be much more interesting than the peaceful, perhaps even boring, heaven. Jeremiah’s ‘reading’ points out the arbitrary nature of the dichotomy between heaven and hell: one culture’s images of condemnation are presented in terms that denote the opposite value in the other culture. To Jeremiah, the images condemn all that is ‘fun’ and all happy people, privileging a sterile and seemingly static heaven, in which the only emotion is God’s scorn for the world. This impression is even more deeply explored in Jeremiah’s experience of the word ‘devil.’ He tries to write it down, messing up the D and erasing it, only to find that he is left with the word ‘evil.’ He finds the word “rather pretty, especially the way the V came to such an elegant point at the bottom, like a tiny, fleeting kiss¹” (62). Here, Highway points out the arbitrary nature of the visual symbols of language, indicating the subjective way in which they can be engaged as both objects and tools. By articulating Jeremiah’s experience of Western values, in which English is the key to his understanding, Highway indicates the inherent incongruence of the Western worldview with that of Jeremiah’s Cree framework.

Even as Jeremiah and Gabriel age and become fluent in the English language, they struggle to find signifiers for their ‘English lives’ in Cree. Soon after Jeremiah completes high

¹ The appeal of the ‘kiss’ also foreshadows the flirtatious struggle that Jeremiah and Gabriel will engage in against the appeal of the sadomasochistic reality in which they find themselves.

school in Winnipeg, Abraham and Mariesis question him about his intentions for the future, placing an obvious preference on his return to their home in the North. Struggling with an explanation, Jeremiah grieves his inability to relate his dreams to his parents: “How, for God’s sake, did any one say ‘concert pianist’ in Cree?” (189). It is obvious that his parents know he has been studying the piano obsessively. However, what fails to ‘translate’ is the ambition that he has surrounding these English words. The words have no direct equivalent in Cree, because the cultural framework for them does not exist. Likewise, when Gabriel is diagnosed and already dying of HIV/AIDS, he struggles with the problem of explaining his terminal illness to his mother. He situates that struggle within the linguistic realm: “How do you say AIDS in Cree, huh? Tell me, what’s the word for HIV?” (296). Here, the problem is not so much translating the name of the disease: it could easily be described as a virus that attacks the immune system of the host and leaves them defenceless, vulnerable, even to the common cold. Or, even more easily, Gabriel could simply announce his imminent death. However, it is the cultural significance of the disease that eludes expression; there is no word for AIDS in Cree because it relates to a number of things that simply do not exist in Northern Cree communities—at this time. At this time, AIDS is predominantly associated with homosexual men, aligning itself with hateful Western stereotypes of promiscuity and violence. Therefore, not only does Gabriel need to translate a virus/disease with no equivalent in the Cree culture and Nation; he also needs to explain the nature of his sexual practice, which bears no equivalent either.² In particular, it is Gabriel’s

² I do not intend to make the faulty presumption that there is no such thing as homosexuality in the Northern Manitoban Cree context. Rather, there is no popular culture around gay sado-masochism and perceived sexual deviance, orgies and widespread promiscuity, in the way that the urban metropolis affords in this period. Particularly in the early years of the HIV epidemic,

sexuality that eclipses the ‘translation’ of this experience. Since both sons associate this sexuality with the abuse that they suffered as children, AIDS and how Gabriel got it become even harder to explain.

In fact, the boys never discuss the abuse directly, instead using various Cree and English words to evoke the experience indirectly, placing it almost outside of language and into a taboo space. When the boys are home from their first year together at the school—the first year of Gabriel’s on-going abuse—their mother tells them the story of Chachagathoo (90). Gabriel makes the connection between this tale and the term ‘*machipoowamoowin*’ or “bad dream power” (91). Later, the term is explained by their uncle through a catachrestic articulation: that which “go[es] *chikaboom chikaboom* in the darkest corner of your mind” (91). Choosing to make the association in English, Gabriel asks Jeremiah if the term explains what Father Lafleur does to the boys at school (91). Responding in English, Jeremiah essentially condemns Gabriel’s experience to silence (92). He tells his brother that even if they told their parents, the adults would be on Father Lafleur’s side. Jeremiah sees his father as extremely devout, and, associating all that has happened to them with the Christian god, Jeremiah seems to believe that his father would condone or support these ‘Christian’ practices³. This conversation takes place entirely in

the virus was strongly associated with homosexuality or perceived sexual deviance—neither of which has the same resonance in *Eemanapiteepitat* (Gabriel and Jeremiah’s fictional hometown).

³ There is no point in speculating about whether or not the child, Jeremiah’s, assumption that his father and mother will take the side of Father Lafleur is correct. However, the assumption does resonate well with the naming of Jeremiah’s father: Abraham. In the Old Testament, Abraham is told to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, to prove his love for the lord (Gen 22.1-19). Likewise, Highway’s Abraham has sacrificed his two sons’ *flesh* to the church, trusting them because of his

English, leaving Mariesis in a linguistic bubble, alone with her “three Native languages” (92). When she inquires about what the boys are discussing, the entire conversation translates to one Cree word: “Makeegway,” ‘nothing’ (92). Through a linguistic barrier Jeremiah isolates the experience as a uniquely English phenomenon, though one still not directly utterable, even in that tongue. Much later in their lives, when Jeremiah has all but achieved his status as a concert pianist, Abraham makes a joke in Cree that has all too many repercussions in English:

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

Abraham’s joke falls flat because in Cree it is a simple joke about two instruments. He’s actually just emphasizing his son’s talent for playing one of the two. The joke is an expression of fatherly pride. In English, obviously, it implies both the instrument and the ‘organ’ of the priest. This recalls the abuse of the brothers at the hands of a priest, while also invoking the desired castration of the priest. Again, the abuse is relegated to a place outside of Cree, and still it is only hinted at in English. Although Jeremiah implies a general unbridgeable chasm between the languages, the use of ‘hell’ as a descriptor recalls the nature of their abuse. It suggests that the unbridgeable chasm between the languages—and thus the people—in this family is the abuse

devoutness or love for the Christian god. Ironically, in the Old Testament, God calls the slaughter off, sending an angel to stop Abraham’s hand. It was a test. In Highway’s novel, the abusive hand is not stopped entirely, however Gabriel—also the name of the most beloved Christian angel-- begins to attend the residential school, and the abuse that Jeremiah experiences is shifted to his younger brother.

itself: the abuse characterizes and fortifies the linguistic divide between them. In this passage and many others, the reader, knowing more than the some characters, witnesses the catachrestic meaning-production, in a way that both embodies the boys' experiences and also transcends their understanding.

As boys, and later as men, the brothers often reflect upon the divide and difference between the languages. As they are leaving the mall, the boys recall the Weetigo and the Weasel story: “‘You know,’ said Jeremiah, suddenly philosophical. ‘You could never get away with a story like that in English’ ”(118). Here Jeremiah expresses a distinctive difference between English and Cree, associating the former with strong moralistic values that would only condemn the visceral humour that characterizes the Cree story. Of course, part of the irony in this passage is that Highway *is*, in fact, telling the story in English. Although the characters are likely speaking Cree, having just been reunited, the passage is written in English for the anticipated reader. Furthermore, it could be argued that the entire novel revolves around aspects of this story, retelling itself over and over again through the sexual struggles and suffering of both brothers. Again, later on, Highway stresses the illicit nature of Cree-in-an-English-context. When the boys have finished their debut performance, as Italian gondolier and concert pianist, their excitement overwhelms Gabriel: “ ‘*Nee, nimantoom!*’ Gabriel snuck the Cree out like a sin” (159). This passage deviates from the pattern of so many others in which Highway notes that a phrase or dialogue is in Cree but presents it in English for the reader: “Gabriel countered in eloquent Cree: the beat was steady, foreboding, and magisterially rhythmic...” (241). Thus, in the post-gondolier-glory passage, Gabriel is “sneaking” the Cree out, and Highway elects to expose this ‘sneaking-in’ of Cree, so that the non-Cree reader cannot actually understand it. This suggests that even within the context of the novel, Cree is a sin. Likewise, the Cree moment allies the

Anglophone reader with the unknowing students in the scene—an outsider to the boys' conversation, their joy/sin. Although the reader is distinctly placed on the 'outside,' and the boys are on the 'inside,' in this phrase it is clear that they are forced to straddle two worlds. The boys occupy the grey areas in between the two languages, filling up these liminal zones with material and experiences that cannot be expressed in either of the tongues alone.

Creating New Space for Embodied Testimony

As a function of operating in constant catachresis, as Spivak's argument would indicate, the novel's two boys, and Highway as the novel's author, perpetually forge new meanings through refashioning parallel linguistic markers and familiar associations. According to Maria Tymoczko, when "speaking of unfamiliar or new phenomena, humans often adapt the language of similar though disparate objects and actions" (19). In other words, when a concept is yet unexpressed, there are no extant or even known ways of articulating this. Without the frequently clichéd modes of expression already available, a speaker must use language in a completely new way to expose new meaning: catachresis in the context of translation often gives way to neologism. Tymoczko asserts that the speaker might use the language already associated with another object or concept in order to orient the hearer/reader to a familiar referent before moving to express the unfamiliar, thus creating a web of associations and parallels. In other words, in translation, one may adopt the framework of meaning associated with a term or concept in one language to develop meaning in the second system of signifiers.⁴ Obviously, this new framework

⁴ An example of this may be the connotations of the colour white. If an English short story regarding a wedding were translated into a Hindu language, the result would be counter-intuitive. While white represents purity in Western culture, and a bride's virginity in the context of marriage, the Hindu reader would immediately think of funerals, cleansing and death. While the

is arbitrary in the second system; however, when successful, it may generate new connotations and meaning. This ‘translation’ of meaning from one signifying system to the next is not isolated to the linguistic realm alone. Using the linguistic and cultural frames of musical organization, terminology and the semiotics of tempo, Highway brings to expression the struggles of Jeremiah and Gabriel. This movement from the signification of signs and symbols to the semiology of sound becomes a *trans-iteration*. This term I coin to describe the translation of the catachrestic expression of the ‘unnamed’ from the intellectual perception to a non-verbal, non-linguistic system of communication. Highway uses the familiar format of a piano sonata to articulate the unspoken gaps between Cree and English in the novel, and even more so, to speak to the spaces between these two languages in which the brothers’ identities grow and develop.

Highway uses Jeremiah’s experience of music and language to illustrate the multifarious expressions that language and catachresis fail to capture fully. When Jeremiah and Gabriel begin to consider a dramatic collaboration, Jeremiah admits: “Yes, he [Jeremiah] had written a spot of music—freak accident though it may have been—interspersed with words he dared to claim were poetry, if in Cree. But did that make him a dramatist? And in English, that humourless tongue...” (273). He wonders about the seeming inaccuracy of calling anything composed in Cree ‘poetry.’ Yet he considers his having dabbled in music a possible basis for a future in drama. Even as he condemns the combination of poetry and Cree, he forges new parallels. When he’s pushed to play the piano at Amanda Clear-sky’s house and his unpractised chords fail to inspire the dancers, he connects the two cultures through the *métissage*: “orkestraw” (256). The phonetic spelling of the word “orchestra” is used to describe the Cree audience, asserting a

result might a weaker and more confusing text, it could also be a deeper, richer interpretation of the ritual of marriage and the short story’s depiction of it.

similarity between the Western and Cree gatherings of people but reducing it to a mere difference in spelling—questioning the authority of orthography. The combination of the word and its spelling does little to change the actual meaning of the word. It simply makes the word stand out—out of place amongst the other words on the page—and draws attention to the contradiction Jeremiah sees within his own identity as constructed or expressed by him: an Indian who plays Chopin (257).

It is not until Jeremiah combines the Cree and Western ways of making music that the cross-cultural spaces/boundaries are truly given voice. In performance, this classically trained pianist leaps from the bench and “with a beaded drumstick pounded at the bass strings of the instrument” (267). Similarly, in his award winning performance of Rachmaniov’s *Prelude*, it is his ‘playing’ of the Northern Manitoba landscape that inspires chords so emotionally charged that the judges have never heard them played that way before (213). As a trans-iteration, the performance of the piece is enhanced both by Jeremiah’s unique inspiration for his ‘reading’ of the score, as well as the fixity of the Western score itself, which administers boundaries within which he interprets. It is only through this combination that the desired effect can be created. Similarly, in the boy’s first production of a play, they discover ‘magic’ in their performance: the “magic had worked, for the audience was speaking to some space inside themselves, some void that needed filling, some depthless sky; and this sky was responding” (267). The void that is being filled is their experience, hidden in the slippage or shady space between the two systems of expression. What cannot be ‘told’ through words alone seeps through in the collaboration of dance, music and poetry. The boy’s testimony of their experiences can only be expressed through a trans-iteration of the meaning, rather than a mere “translation.” By combining systems of expression, Jeremiah and Gabriel are able to articulate unspoken places or things not signified by

either culture solely. Likewise, the audience is able to fully witness—with all of its implications—their testimony. As Sarah Krotz argues, this trans-iterative process is “about dwelling within the chasms between cultures rather than bridging them, however; accordingly, music creates not a harmony so much as productive dissonance” (184). By combining modes and attempting to voice the unspoken spaces eclipsed by each system, the music created by Jeremiah and Gabriel expresses the reality within these spaces, illuminating them with this new mode of expression. The music of the characters does not create a harmony between the two modes, but rather sounds the echoes that indicate the spaces between. The chasm is mapped with sound.

Highway’s use of musical language and formatting in the structure of the narrative contributes to the sense of musical trans-iteration as depicted in the action of the novel. He organizes the novel into six sections, as a musical score complete with movements. Each section bears a heading characteristic of a movement in a musical work. The first section is prefaced with *allegro ma non troppo*: “brisk, lively, quick” “but not too much” (OED). Distinguished within a system of speeds, this phrase would traditionally be a direction to the musician. This is the section in which the brothers are born, their father wins the race, they survive a caribou stampede, Champion falls in love with music and the Catholic background of the family is introduced. Essentially, all the background information necessary to the rest of the novel is laid out in a panoptic-zoom of about seven years. According to the ‘directions,’ one can speedily read through this section—just quickly enough to move on to the action, but not so quickly as to miss some of the essential little details that foreground the rest of the novel. From this perspective, it appears that the section titles are instructive. As in sheet music, each movement of a piece is prefaced by descriptive information that guides the musician as to the tone and impression of the work. These commands make sense with the tonal ‘tempo’ of the action. The other sections also

each contain information as to how they are to be read. The second section is to be read or ‘played’ *andante cantabile*, “moderately slow and distinct” “in a smooth and flowing style, such as would be suited for singing” (OED). This is the section in which Jeremiah and then Gabriel are sent to the residential school. In this pensive mood, the abuse begins. Ironically, this is also the “singing” section in which the lasting silence that shrouds the abuse comes into effect. Highway ‘composes’ this section as a slow point in the narrative, suggesting that close attention to detail is needed. Obviously the description of the ‘movement’ is also intended to set the tone for the section, which would be slightly mournful and simple.

When Jeremiah moves to Winnipeg in the third section, the directive is *allegretto grazioso*, or “somewhat less brisk [than *allegro*]” and “in a graceful manner” (OED). These directions are particularly interesting because of the musical focus of the section. This is when Jeremiah begins playing the great piano compositions of the Romantics: Chopin and Rachmaninov⁵ (Hinson 4). It is fitting that, as Jeremiah is being schooled obsessively in the classical repertoire of the piano and as Gabriel aggressively pursues the graceful movements of classical ballet and dance, the mood of the ‘movement’ should be so indicated. Just at the debut

⁵ This evocation of the Romantic period is noteworthy given Highway’s sectional ‘directions’ for tempo. The Romantic Period was so-named because of contemporaneous advances in the pedals of the *pianoforte*: the mechanism of the instrument that allows for a muting, or a resonance within the notes, newly allowed for a blurring of sound and changes in volume. Therefore the piano was not only more expressive and emotive, but also “the way an instrument was played or the ‘interpretation’ of a conductor added an emotion and personal element” (Hinson 4). Highway is aware of the ‘interpretations’ that are possible, but gives directions to narrow the results.

of each boy's success in their respective classical fields, the section and tone change abruptly. The section that bears Jeremiah's piano competition and Gabriel's flight to Toronto is directed to be *molto agitato*: "very" "agitated" (OED). The disjunction between the classical careers of each character and their identities as 'sons of the caribou-hunter' is conveyed in this direction. Likewise, the fact that the boys are splitting apart—Jeremiah in his relentless obsession with the piano as an outlet, and Gabriel with his first orgy and 'coming-out' in front of Jeremiah—is well depicted through the tonal anxiety. In this section, the boys return home together, for the last time in the novel before the death of Abraham and it becomes painfully clear that the divide between them and their parents has widened.

The last two sections redirect the tone of the novel as the lives of the characters are redirected. The fifth section, *adagio espressivo*, is to be read "slowly; leisurely and gracefully" and evidently, expressively (OED). The tempo of this section reflects the speed of Jeremiah's own life: he is stuck in a low place, working as a social worker, and fighting off a six-year hangover (219). Similarly, Gabriel's life has turned into a repeating cycle of professional dancing, living with Gregory Newman, and secret, unbridled promiscuity. This is the section in which the brothers attend a pow-wow together. It is Jeremiah's first time. There they hear the rest of the Chachagathoo story, and Jeremiah abandons Gabriel alone with a bunch of "fag-bashers" (265). This section shows the conditions in each brother's life, foreshadowing the prolific changes in the end of the novel. It expresses the anguish of Jeremiah attempting to understand his place between two worlds. The final section, *presto con fuoco*, calls for an ending that is "fast" and "with fire" (OED). Aside from the literal fire—the section does end with a fire alarm and the warning of evacuating the building, when Anne-Adele Ghostrider burns sacred herbs and grasses in the hospital room—the section also rushes through a 'wildfire' of events and

emotions. Gabriel discovers his positive HIV status and battles with the Weetigo. Jeremiah synthesizes modes of expression and exorcizes the residue of abuse and Weetigo through hunching over a typewriter and working with youth in the community. Meanwhile their dramatic piece on a similar topic is being performed. Finally, Gabriel dies and is rushed off with the Trickster. The finish is rich and speedy just as the directive indicates.

Music guides the interpretation of the text and is also another medium in which the process of translation and expression can take place. Although Krotz suggests that “the reader is encouraged to feel and hear the words of the text through an over-arching progression of tonal and rhythmic patterns”(186), Highway intends a more explicit connection. He develops the tempos of the work through a dependence on the reader’s cultural literacy, particularly his or her knowledge of classical music. Likewise, directing the reader through a system traditionally used to direct the musician encourages active reading. Highway is associating the reader of his novel not only with the passive audience of a musical performance, as Krotz suggests, but also with the musician, who participates in an exchange with the score. Further, without this dialogic relationship, a score cannot be played. Therefore, Highway parallels this relationship, one which can only be realized through partnership. As Dingwaney points out, in translation processes

the self or one culture encounters, and, more importantly, interacts with an ‘other’ or another culture. It is a fertile space, and disquieting, because, if explored fully, it proves to be a sphere (or zone) in which one both abandons and assumes associations.

(Dingwaney 8)

This dialogic exchange between the translator, or self, and the cultural currency indicated in the signifying system is similar to the relationship between musician, score and performance. The rigidity of the signifying system—notes, time, and textual suggestions—is approached by the

fluidity of the musician's expectations and impressions, giving him or her license to exploit the possibilities in execution. As Dingwaney points out, it is in this semiotic place—between system and subject—that meaning is made, that 'associations' and parallels are picked up, dropped, or considered. Considering Highway's text as a trans-iteration—from Cree to English, from language to music—one can see that Highway has invited the reader into a multivalent, dialogical process of meaning making.

By designing the 'space' of the novel as the space of translation, Highway facilitates new modes of building assumptions and revaluing them. Highway facilitates a meeting, a first encounter and a new perception of worth that could preface a reconciliation of understanding. Rather than simply straddling two linguistic and cultural models, the brothers succeed through combining the two worlds, as well as their own gifts, to create something that is both distinctly Cree and Western: *métissage* communicable to a diverse audience. Jeremiah's experience, in playing the piano for one of Gabriel's and his performances, presents an interesting metaphor for how Highway grasps this trans-iterative process: "these weren't the keys on a piano but a length of curved peeled spruce, the handlebar of a sled" (213). The piano keys turn into a specific referent of his father, but also, more metaphorically, into a vehicle. Given the communicative connotations of the characters' goals and wishes, it would seem that the vehicle 'drives' towards clarity and effective communication or articulation of the character's ideas/message. Likewise, this metaphor extends to the novel itself, in the trans-iteration of Cree to English, and tempo to mood, serving as a vehicle to unhindered articulation and audacious identity claims. In this sense, the testimony of experience in the text is embodied and performed, as well as described, unabashedly situating the reader as witness in this space of the multi-mediated translator. Harsha Ram argues that any insistence on the productivity of literary space pushes against traditions of

‘time’ as the only current of change (209). That is, if literature insists upon the mutability and generative possibility within, then timeless literary ‘space’ can also be the location of motivating change, effecting notions of time and history:

to conceive of literature as a spatial history is to investigate a mobile geography as an alternative means of defining, through poetic language, the morphologies of cultural collision and literary-historical transformation. What might have been the concern of cultural anthropology or at least the sociology of literature, however, becomes, for the translator, a formal moment of the text. (Ram 209)

For Ram, the translated text, as a locus of decolonization, is facilitated by poetic language. The text can embody, chart and document cultural collision, as an isolated but still fluid ‘moment’ of the text. Arguably then, the process of cultural collision is available in the encounter with text. Hence, engaging with this text perpetuates this moment indefinitely. Certainly this availability of revaluing and meaning making in cultural collision can be seen in Highway’s text, which frames a moment of synthesis, in the testimony of the residential school survivor’s testimony, but also in Highway’s own processes (as a residential school survivor). In the contemporary Canadian context of reconciliation this assertion, this framed moment of testimony and witness is weighty, even profound. It subverts the notions of ‘closure’ as an end point, a goal so often associated with, or wished for in, the public processes of official reconciliation. As Barbara Godard argues, “What such heterogeneity and hybridization [in the translating process] effect through permutations and instabilities is the possibility of ‘shifting the very terms of the semiotic itself’ by dispersing and displacing every possibility of hierarchization” (128). In his novel, Highway shifts the meaning surrounding the experience of Indigenous people within Westernized social systems in Canada. Likewise, the historical hierarchy of meaning is shifted—if not dismantled—

in his exploration of residential schools. By destabilizing the historicized moment and inviting the readership to witness and participate in the process of revaluing testimony, Highway creates new venues for witness and testimony, while simultaneously redistributing responsibility and fresh opportunity.

Mandated Reconciliation

In light of Canada's recent apology and the institution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Highway's model of testimony and witness may model a way forward, a hope for the trans-iteration between peoples. Beginning with the original litigation brought forward by residential school survivors, and culminating with an official apology (2008) and the launching of a settlement agreement (2006), there has been a long struggle in Canada for the public recognition of the residential school abuses. At present, the government and the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people of Canada have begun a long-anticipated official process of reconciliation. The settlement includes a financial component, as well as a TRC. Yet, the most remarkable—ahistorical and ultra-historical—aspect of this process was the official apology, issued by the Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, on June 11th, 2008. The apology was a national event, taking place on the floor of Parliament and broadcast nationwide. It was witnessed on television, on the radio, in homes, offices, businesses and cars. Despite the clear importance of such an event for survivors and their families, and the surrounding society, there are many ideological and even concrete risks associated with this kind of recognition. Canada's recognition is not unique, globally, but it has come in a time of historical recompense and of unprecedented bureaucratic contrition. Apologies are a necessary and deeply human aspect of reconciliation. Yet, on a grand scale, apologies can be dismissed as 'symbolic politics,' for even as they embody the contrition of administrative authority, they are purely representative of a

change in policy. Because verbal apologies are an iteration comprised of signifiers alone, they are, in Spivakian terms, a metaphor for contrition, not the contrition itself. Only actions stemming from this oral recognition can be considered tangible contrition that leaves the realm of symbolism and representation. As Nobles notes, “symbolic politics can often seem to be a diversion, directing energies and attention away from more substantial matters or as ‘curtains’ obscuring the real political actors and political processes working behind them, or just as often, in plain view” (151). A warning from Derrida cautions about the meaning-emptying possibilities of such symbolic politics: “the simulacra, the automatic ritual, hypocrisy, calculation, or mimicry are often a part, and invite parasites to this ceremony of culpability” (Derrida 29). Derrida stresses that although this ‘ceremony of culpability’ may be a positive and well-intended action in itself, the repetition echoed in a global arena of contrition and ritual might drain the event of its meaning.

Although Canada’s official apology promises to be more than just a symbolic gesture—as the TRC is an ongoing event, as actual monetary compensation has been planned, and in a few cases, distributed—in order for it to be effective the motives and intentions of all parties must be congruent. There are mixed opinions regarding this notion of ‘efficacy.’ As Deena Rymhs argues, “In a Canadian context, reconciliation has been driven by a public wishing to atone for its colonial past. The process invites an appropriation and subsequent dissolution of guilt through affective responses to history” (Rymhs 117). That is, this apology is motivated by an organized desire to silence history in a way that will not only dissolve the guilt of residential school abuse, but also push the macro-violence of colonization out of the collective view. In many ways, it is an apology given and accepted by the same governing body, potentially altering the reciprocity traditionally associated with the process. For Rymhs, the problem begins with the word

reconciliation⁶: “With its overlapping therapeutic, ethical, political, religious, legal, and historical registers, reconciliation can in fact obfuscate notions of guilt and responsibility” (Rymhs 115). This process risks becoming an enactment of the events it attempts to process by re-imposing a narrative of victimhood on the Indigenous peoples of Canada. However, the placement of the TRC—and all measurements of its ‘success’—in the hands of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation seems to express an official understanding of the cultural need for trust and familiarity in this process. Although the original intention may be for an official end to this aspect of history, and the motivation may have been guilt, the effort to involve effective and culturally specific means of healing does reflect a genuine wish for wellbeing.

In order to promote true wellbeing and a fruitful relationship between and among all parties, ‘reconciliation,’ in a Canadian context, must address the ongoing structural and systemic violence and power dynamics of colonization. It is imperative that, as with Highway’s suspension of the testimonial moment, the TRC not seek to historicize or isolate the abuses as contained in the past alone; rather, the act of witnessing, and all its connotations of culpability, must be unforgettably impressed upon the relationship between the Indigenous nations of Canada and the Canadian state. Some aspects of the redistributive component of the TRC reflect the government’s refusal to see the residential school history as part of a greater and ongoing narrative of colonial violence in Canada. While all students of federally funded organizations are considered eligible for financial recompense, all institutions not directly associated with the government—including provincial schools—are disqualified from the agreement:

⁶ One might note that, particularly in relation to the heinous abuses of residential schools, the multivalent religious connotations of this word are cruelly ironic and reflect a lasting ignorance and thoughtlessness.

Institutions have been disqualified due to non-involvement of the federal government, meaning that a school was provincially operated or run by religious or private organizations without federal assistance, or due to the fact that home placements, boarding homes, hostels within hospitals, or sanatoriums have been deemed non-residential by the parties. (Reimer 1)

An assimilative agenda was clearly the imperative of the government: promoted, legislated and allowed. Therefore, even though other organizations were not directly or monetarily overseen by the government, the “kill the Indian in the child” mentality stemmed from mandated doctrine. From this view, all institutions fell under the aegis of the federal agenda as they not only ideologically supported them but also legally allowed them. To rule, then, that any non-federally funded experience is illegitimate, according to the redistribution schema, is to again refuse to recognize the reality of colonial violence. Likewise, to refuse to recognize the culpability for allowing residential schools to exist, albeit unfunded federally, is to suggest that such a discriminatory position may be admissible or may occur again or may be ongoing under different guises.

The Survivance Model

In its exploitation and reinterpretation of liminal zones of expression, Highway’s novel can be characterized according to Gerald Vizenor’s concept of survivance: a survivance text that immediately enforces positive expressions of empowerment and presentism, while also ‘teasing’ out the possibilities of real colonization, without confirming stereotypes of victimhood and negation. Vizenor summarizes his own term as “the continuation of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (Vizenor 1). Vizenor distinguishes between a reactionary text and a text that insists upon its own existence, with or without an event to which it is reacting. Vizenor sees that

it is essential to create artistic expressions as intellectual exploration, not only in reaction to historical or current attitudes or events, but also in reflection of itself. Although aspects of the stories may be characterized by events and attitudes, they are more than simple reiterations of the events: they are irreducible to accounts of crisis or victimhood. In an investigation of Cree culture and trauma, Kristina Fagan explains, “writers use storytelling to explore connections between the traumatic past and troubles in the present and to self-reflexively examine the potential and limits of such indirect and humorous connection” (204). This is shown in the novel through Jeremiah’s use of the dramatic narrative to relate a powerful critique of the Catholic Church which is so engaging and popular that it is reported that the Roman Catholic Bishop of Toronto sneaks into the last showing. Gabriel and Jeremiah use their dramatic explorations to examine their own pasts, coming to understand the importance of their Cree spiritual framework and its influence in the formation of each of their plays. When Jeremiah works with Native youth, helping the children to use their Cree tongues to make music, he expresses the desire to help this generation to express themselves. Likewise, in the Life and Times interview, on CBC, Highway notes that his own funny, poignant and cutting plays have spread like rumor throughout the country and are now being read by young Indigenous people.

Highway forges new language for Native communities and his readers, an optional vocabulary. He shows them that the venues of expression are open to their thoughts and impressions: creating texts that witness to the experience of Native youth and families, rather than reiterating the mainstream Canadian narratives. Sam McKegney writes, “Highway’s project as a writer, like Jeremiah’s, is not simply to produce a politically relevant work for a knowledgeable literary audience but also to stimulate a thirst for knowledge (Indigenous and otherwise) among Indigenous youth” (102). I believe Highway would switch McKegney’s order

of representation, stating that his main objective is to stimulate a search for knowledge and to witness the identity struggles of indigenous youth, and placing the understanding of a purely literary audience in a secondary position. According to Garnet Ruffo,

Where new experiences come into play, the [Indigenous] individual translates these into the context of this communal experience, which has never been forgotten but passed from one generation to the next. In other words, Native writers while writing from their individual perspectives are in sense adjuncts of the collective experience. (667)

One of the key features of Highway's narrative is his engagement with an on-going discourse of Native communal identity, and more specifically, a testimony to the way in which residential school abuse has affected that identity. For Highway, the exploration of his experience as an individual is as important as, if not eclipsed by, the importance of communal learning and expression. In her article, "Tewatatha:wi: Aboriginal Nationalism in Taiaiake Alfred's 'Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto'," Fagan reminds us of the values surrounding the sharing of information and stories. She hints that viewing Aboriginal Literature as a speech act is key: "Arguing that a text can function as a ritual reminds us that a written work is not only an object but also an interaction between a writer and a reader, an event with real-life consequences" (Fagan 24). Fagan urges readers not to discredit the subtle and subversive capacity of storytelling for effecting change. It is important to view the power of story-telling in Highway's novel as stemming from a cultural background, and therefore relevant to an informed reading. But it is essential to consider this text as an active event that bears witness to ongoing testimonials of the history and present effects of the residential school abuses.

In order to find productive modes of reconciling—to use that ill-suited word—residential school survivors and the rest of Canada, we must look to Highway's and other Indigenous

models of survivance. Highway incorporates both the tools of Western discourse and the complex apparatus of Cree theory and spirituality, using “the novel’s heteroglossic potential to stage a mixing of Cree and non-Cree frameworks” (Rymhs 108). In the words of McKegney, “Kiss of the Fur Queen enacts a significant imaginative intervention into a discursive environment dominated by simulations designed to ‘fix’ residential school experiences in the realm of an historical discourse which maintains non-Native authority” (83). Jeremiah’s educational efforts, Gabriel’s choreography, and use of important Cree narratives, such as the Weetigo and the Weasel imply and demonstrate the cyclical nature of experience in the narrative and indicate the ongoing experience of residential school and colonial trauma. Likewise, Highway’s own practice as an author, of witnessing to his own experience refutes the possibility of ‘fixing’ his experience in the past or resting it to a set place.

Conclusions

Tomson Highway’s Kiss of the Fur Queen is a trans-iterative literary expression that stretches the boundaries of testimony. Through the narrative composition of the lives of the two boys , Highway’s discursive exploration of the ramifications of linguistic coding in the processes of colonization and dehumanization exposes a fluid and generative mode of communicating the residential school experience as a paradigm of inter-cultural identity formation. By revealing the catachrestic fallacy at the heart of all signification of the profound, Highway exposes the difficulty of naming the individual experience of his two main characters, whose lives take place between two hierarchically distinguished systems, rife with colonial codes and strictures. The thorough musicality of the structure, content and contextualization of the novel provides an artistic embodiment of the creative hope which not only finds a way to communicate the ‘yet-unnamed’ impressions, but also implies a fresh ethic, a fresh way of describing human realities.

His use of the musical signifiers and codes suggests that he sees these ‘rhapsodic’ stitches as like linguistic signifying texts, to weave new visions and to reshape the human ethical imagination. Like Jeremiah in the residential school, who encounters the V in D-EVIL and sees a “tiny fleeting kiss” where others see fear, Highway encounters the terms of his experience in a semiotic consciousness and sees a “kiss,” a hope for recognition, in the rereading of inherited meanings.

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