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BIRTH, DEATH, HEALING: CYCLES AND REPETITIONS IN TOMSON HIGHWAY'S KISS OF THE FUR QUEEN

Keywords: *Cree; Residential Schools; non-linear narratives; storytelling; intergenerational trauma; regeneration.*

Abstract: *In his 1998 novel* Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Cree author Tomson Highway narrates the lives of Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis, two Cree brothers from northern Manitoba. Numerous stylistic, semantic, and temporal repetitions cycle back and forth throughout the book, following traditional Cree oral storytelling techniques. These repetitions illustrate different life cycles between conception, birth, and death of three generations of characters. The inter-generational trauma of residential schools is embodied by the Windigo, a traditional Cree cannibalistic monster. His presence is regularly countered by apparitions of the Fur Queen, a protective spirit who guides the characters through these cycles until their death. Although death is the end of the protagonist's generation, it also lights the spark of cultural regeneration for the upcoming one. In my presentation, I will explain the use of repetitions in the novel to illustrate the overlapping cycles of violence and trauma, and also healing and continuation. I will illustrate the relevance of traditional Indigenous storytelling in contemporary written literature, and demonstrate how it cycles back to the necessity for cultural survival.*

Following the Native American Renaissance of the seventies in the United States, recent Indigenous fiction writers from both Canada and the USA took on creating new literary genres to express the damages of colonialism on their communities, and to document their quest for healing and survivance. Indigenous Gothic is of particular interest because it uses traditional features such as a foreboding setting, a society in transition, cultural anxiety over progress and change, manifestations of the uncanny and the unspeakable, monsters, and a past which haunts the present, to narrate Indigenous histories, struggles, and resilience. In this paper, I will focus on one novel in particular, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, by Cree writer Tomson Highway. The themes of the Indian residential schools and of the physical, sexual, and psychological abuse that Indigenous children suffered there are typical of focused discussions dealing with this text. The goal of this paper is to discuss the novel's complex composition, and Highway's use of loops and repetitions in episodes related to birth, death, and regeneration. While this novel is written in English and follows a Western linear narrative, it also includes circular patterns embedded within one another, in the style of traditional Cree storytelling. Tomson Highway uses what Western analysis would call flashbacks and flash-forwards to tell the story of two Cree brothers and their community, using Cree storytelling structures, linguistic tools, and narrative techniques.

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Kiss of the Fur Queen narrates the lives of two Cree brothers, Jeremiah-Champion and Gabriel Okimasis, from the night of conception all the way to the night of one of their deaths. It tells us about the Indian residential schools and the Catholic priests who oversaw them. These schools were operating both in Canada and in the USA between the 1870's and the 1990's. They were funded by Indian Affairs, though they were run and managed by Christian groups (Paquin, "Canada confronts its dark history"). Indigenous children from all over the country were taken from their parents as young as possible and kept at the schools until the beginning of their adulthood. Upon arrival at the schools, they were stripped of their clothes and all personal belongings were confiscated and destroyed. Their hair was cut short, and they were given both a uniform to wear and a number to be identified with. They had to learn English, British history, Christian religion and practices, and were forced to work at the school as a form of training for future jobs (CBC, "A history of residential schools in Canada"). This system meant that girls would cook and tend to the dorms and boys would cut wood and work as gardeners. We now have thousands of testimonies and documents to prove that these children were tortured, starved, and often sexually abused. They were whipped or forced to wash their mouth out with lye when caught speaking their native tongue. They were denied medication during tuberculosis outbreaks, and were deprived of entire food groups as a form of medical experimentation, all of which was ordered by the Canadian government (McKenzie, Varcoe, Browne, and Day 5).

On top of the individual trauma this schooling system inflicted upon the children attending, entire groups, tribes and nations throughout Canada were distressed. Because entire successive generations of children were taken from their communities and sent to these schools, cultural and familial ties were so badly severed that Indigenous peoples today are only beginning to find ways to heal. Languages went extinct or became severely endangered, and stories and histories were not passed on. Songs, dances, and artistic and practical skills were not taught, and later generations suffered from loss of identity, belonging, and functioning. Very recent studies compare this inter-generational trauma to the same one experienced by the Holocaust survivors and their descendents (Brown, "The Holocaust,"; Deerchild, "Lasting Effects").

Even in fiction, these themes are present in recent Indigenous literature, especially in Gothic and horror novels which use supernatural elements to describe trauma and find recovery. This is also the case in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which hints at ways in which the brothers can attempt to heal, in addition to helping their Cree community, by distancing themselves from urban and colonial spaces and from Catholic practices by re-learning Cree traditions. In this essay, I have isolated three examples of repetitions and loops in the novel: descriptions of familiar characters and locations, episodes of gendered colonial violence, and circular patterns between conception, birth, death, and regeneration.

The first type of repetition is found in instances of the description of familiar characters and locations. The rhythm of these repetitions, as well as the semantic choices made by the author illustrate a constructed effort to use non-linear, traditional storytelling style to describe familiar, customary elements for the Cree protagonists. These elements center around their family and community, customs and traditions,

and religious practices. We should note then that although the brothers' experiences and memories of residential school are similar and shared, these episodes are not written in the circular, repetitive style. These binary repetitions only occur in the context of positive episodes. They keep the familiar comfortable, within the sphere of ancestral storytelling, and out of the Western linearity. Repetitions always exist in pairs when the boys talk about things they hold dear, and those which are well-known and/or conventional. These include descriptions of family members, activities they are enjoying together, or shared memories. Examples from the text would be:

> Annie Moostoos, his wife's addled fifty-five-year-old cousin, renowned throughout the north for the one tooth left in her head (16).
> His own crusty, half-crazed fifty-five-year-old cousin, Kookoos Crook, renowned throughout the north for having chopped a juvenile caribou in the left hindquarter with a miniature axe" (16).
>
> "Neee, nimantoom," Jeremiah laughed, light as a springtime killdeer. For two brown Indian boys - not one, but two - were dancing-skipping-floating down Broadway Avenue, tripping each other's Cree, getting up and laughing, tripping over each other's Cree, getting up and laughing (114).
>
> Before he could count to one hundred, Abraham Okimasis was racing past the lopsided log cabin of Black-eyed Susan Magipom and her terrible husband, Happy Doll (14-15).
> Before he could count to a hundred and ten, Abraham Okimasis was racing past the red-tiled roof of Choggylut McDermott and his wife, Two-Room (15).

The second instance of repetition follows a very different pattern for dark and painful events. It is found in successive episodes of the protagonists witnessing Indigenous young women being assaulted, and/or finding their bodies. With the syntactic, semantic, and rhythmic repetitions in these passages, the author calls his readers' attention to the systemic violence committed against Indigenous women in Canada.

During their stay in downtown Winnipeg, the brothers are confronted three times with news of young Cree women who are found murdered. When this occurs in the novel, some words are repeated exactly while other sentences are very similar in syntax but not in vocabulary. Similarly to the other loops in this novel, each passage follows the same structure. We first get some details about the girl, then information about her attackers are added. The description of her dead body and ensuing press coverage of the crime are then mentioned. Finally, the brothers' feelings, such as fear, anger, and disgust about the events conclude each successive passage. The construction of this flow conveys how the brothers' feelings intensify with each murder they become aware of.

> Into the cure of the propped-up piano top drifted, teetering dangerously on white heels, a reflection of the Indian woman in soiled white polyester. A car came by that would have looked at home framed by the Californian surf and sunset: open convertible, white, chrome gleaming. Four teenaged men

> with Brylcreamed hair lounged languidly inside, crotches thrust shamelessly, and laughed and puffed at cigarettes and sucked at bottles of nameless liquids.
> "Hey, babe!" they hooted smoothly to the polyester Indian princess. . . .
> One week later, he [Jeremiah] saw the woman's picture on a back page of the Winnipeg *Tribune*: the naked body of Evelyn Rose McCrae - long-lost daughter of Mistik Lake - had been found in a ditch on the city's outskirts, a shattered beer bottle lying gently, like a rose, deep inside her crimson-soaked sex (106-107).

> At the far end of the alley, he thought he saw - to his dying day, he could not be sure - a mass of bodies, men, he thought, young men with baseball caps standing in a tight circle around… around what? He could hear male grunting from within the ring, female whimpering, moaning, the northern Manitoba Cree unmistakable in the rising and falling of her English.
> . . .
> Two days later, the brothers Okimasis would see, on a back page of the Winnipeg *Tribune*, a photograph of Madeline Jeanette Lavoix, erstwhile daughter of Mistik Lake, her naked body found in a North Main alleyway behind a certain hotel of questionable repute, a red-handled screwdriver lying gently, like a rose, deep within the folds of her blood-soaked sex. Jeremiah would recall, with a simmering rage, one Evelyn Rose McCrae (131-132).

> A woman so young she could have been a child leaned against a wall, lost, lonely, a halo of blood-red neon hovering above her head. Wearing a summery della robbia blue windbreaker, her legs exposed between a miniskirt and brown suede boots, the pale blue rose in her hair appeared to vibrate from her shivers. She was pregnant, five months, maybe six. She staggered, just as a hulking junk heap of a car pulled up, springs groaning from the weight of young white men out looking for a thrill.
> . . .
> Evelyn Rose McCrae and Madeline Jeanette Lavoix appeared, keeping vigil by their teenaged sister with the sad synthetic rose (138).

In similar fashion to the historically accurate though fictional tale of a residential school run by a pedophile priest, these above passages function as a parable (i.e. a didactic story that illustrate a teaching) for the tragic reality of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in Canada. Over the past forty years, more than 1100 Indigenous girls and women were kidnapped and/or murdered in Canada. Their groups are overrepresented in violent crimes, although proportionally they are the smallest racial minority in the country. Following the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the federal government started a public inquiry into the issue (the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women) in 2015. This inquiry is still on-going today.

In the novel, the repetition of names and descriptions of the murdered young Cree women serves to re-humanizing them, pulling them from the status of mere statistic to that of a person with a name and a community of loved ones. The authors' description of the murderers seems very detailed: model of their car, physical

description, clothing, and voices, but is at the same time so general that it would not allow for any identification. The only certainty we have is that these violent men are White Canadians. This is an important point, however, as it shows they embody the colonial and gender-violence of the settler state. According to Anishinaabe poet and novelist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "white supremacy, rape culture, and the real and symbolic attack on gender, sexual identity and agency are very powerful tools of colonialism, settler colonialism and capitalism, primarily because they work very efficiently to remove Indigenous peoples from [their] territories and to prevent reclamation of those territories through mobilization" (Simpson, "Not Murdered, Not Missing").

The third girl mentioned in the novel is not found murdered as we may have come to fear. The brothers meet her again, years later, at a powwow they are attending in the quest for recovery of their Indigenous traditions. She is pregnant again, or still, which case we do not know:

> Then he saw her, on the dance floor: the della robbia blue windbreaker, the calf-length boots, the pale blue rose in her hair, now ten, eleven months' pregnant, her womb engorged, mountainous. . . . How could she find the strength to stand, never mind to dance? (175-176)

This is the first hint at the possibility for an escape from these cycles of life and death, and a glimpse at the possibility for healing. This pregnant woman, dancing, shows them a possibility for survival. This way involves returning to their home community and to their Cree roots, which will aid in their healing. This mention of the dance also links back to the nights of the brothers' conception, when their mother, Mariesis, discovers her pregnancy through the smells and lights of the land:

> Mariesis half-closed [her eyes] and let this moment take her, out the little window above the bed, out past the branch of the young spruce tree bending under its weight of snow, out to millions of stars, to the northern lights: the ancestors of her people, ten thousand generations, to the beginning of time. Dancing (19).

In Cree stories about the creation of the Round Dance, or Braid Bundle Dance, a young girl is taught songs and dances by her deceased mother, who comes to her in a vision: "Tell the people that when this circle is made, we the ancestors will be dancing with you and we will be as one" (Cuthand, "Origin"). The dance has healing powers and helps the participants grieve and process the loss of their loved ones. It is a very powerful story, and Cree people still follow this tradition today. *Nimihitow Iskwew* (Dancing Woman) is a show designed by Cree choreographer Sandra Lamouche to show how "culture, story, and ceremony can guide towards healing in a post-colonial/contemporary society" (Lamouche, "Nimihitow Iskwew"). Other Indigenous groups use dancing programs to help their youth cope with the inter-generational trauma of the residential schools. In Arviat, Nunavut, Inuk teenagers follow "Dancing Towards the Light," an educational program designed to prevent suicides in Northern communities. By connecting with their peers and sharing the stories of their elders, youngsters prepare dancing routines and compete against each

other, following the tradition of Inuit public sport competitions (Cahana, "Dancing Towards the Light,").

The third form of evidence of repetitions in this novel is the circular pattern of major life events such as the conception, birth, and death of the protagonists. It also takes the shape of the storyline of community members from the generation of their parents, and the future generation of Cree children in Canada. The loops and repetitions utilized link the past to the present, transcend individuals' deaths, and participate in the regeneration of Cree cultural survivance. The closest repetitions of words are found in the story of the brothers' conception, in bits and pieces from the spark triggered by the kiss of the Fur Queen. They are also found throughout their father Abraham's journey home after winning the sleigh race at the World Championship.

These loops echo Gabriel's last thoughts on the days before his death, bringing them around as if embedded in his father's past, and linking them back to the Cree story of life and conception:

> As its galaxies of stars and suns and moons and planets hummed their way across the sky and back, the Fur Queen smiled enigmatically, and from the seven stars on her tiara burst a human fetus, fully formed, opalescent, ghostly.
> The Fur Queen disappeared, leaving her cape and crown, and the ghost child drifting in the womb of space, the wisps of winter cloud its amniotic fluid, turning and turning, with a speed as imperceptible yet certain as the rhythm of the spheres. And slowly, ever so slowly, the ghost baby tumbled, head over heels over head, down, down to Earth (12).

The final chapter describes the last days of Gabriel's life, which were spent at the hospital with his brother Jeremiah. This chapter often echoes word per word the very first chapter of the novel, in which his father's victorious race is narrated. Despite the linearity that the format of the novel imposes on written stories, the author manages to create a loop and embed the time of the son's death into the night of his conception, effectively linking the road to healing through dance:

> One trillion miles above the aboriginal jamboree, the ghostly foetus continued its airy descent towards Earth. And only medicine women, shamans, artists, and visionaries were aware that a star-born child would soon be joining their dance (17).

Gabriel and Jeremiah's birth stories are embedded within the Cree creation story of conception:

> And *K'si mantou*, the Great Spirit, held the baby boy by his big toe and dropped him from the stars. . . . *Poof!* he went on his bum, smack into the most exquisite mound of snow in the entire forest, making crystals of silver spray shoot up to join the stars (19).

Each time, the baby boy races through the woods, like his father raced through the woods before his birth. He is helped in his journey by a rabbit "who took pity on him, for by this time, the naked child was shivering. The rabbit slipped off his coat and wrapped it around the child's shivering, plump midsection. The as-yet-unborn infant made his gratitude clear to the rabbit, [...] and the travelling baby and the now naked, shivering animal would be friends for life" (20-21). Here, the repetition of the word "shivering", and then of "naked" and "shivering" again but inverted, displays the link between Cree people and the animal world, and illustrates how important selflessness and gratitude are. The creation story does not only describe the Cree worldview, it also serves to predict the future personality of the boy as well, in the form of a lesson on how to behave. At the end of his race through the woods, the baby is delivered to his parents:

> The baby boy was floating in the air, his skin no longer silver blue but pinkish brown. As he floated, he turned and turned and laughed and laughed. Until, lighter than a tuft of goose-down, he fell to Earth, his plump posterior landing neatly in a bowl of silver (22).

The bowl of silver in question is the World Cup that Abraham received from the Fur Queen when he won the sled race. He exclaimed: "*Ho-ho!* My victory boy!", "*Ho-ho!* My champion boy!" (22) Everything is again linked together: Abraham's race, his victory, and the kiss of the Fur Queen, all precede and predict the birth of his son, and even his son's name, stating that "was when Champion Okimasis was born." (22)

The novel opens on Abraham Okimasis, Gabriel and Jeremiah's father, competing in the world race with his sleigh-dogs. His victory brings about his encounter with the Fur Queen, who attaches herself to him and his family and will follow the boys from conception to death. On his deathbed, Gabriel dreams of the race:

> *Eight grey huskies crossed the tundra, Gabriel Okimasis driving them as fast as they could go. He could see, or thought he could, the finish line a mile ahead. What he could also see, however, was other mushers leading him, three, perhaps even four. Which meant forty others somewhere to the rear of him. But what did these forty matter? What mattered was there were three or four ahead of him. What mattered was he was not leading.*
> *And he was so tired, his dogs beyond tired, so tired they would have collapsed, right there, if he was to relent.*
> *"Mush!" was the only word left that he could feed them, dogs and master both, with the will to travel on*" (303, italics in the original text).

On the very first page of the novel, we read this episode from his father's race:

> "Mush!" he cried, "mush." The desperation in his voice, like a man about to sob, surprised him.
> Abraham Okimasis could see, or thought he could, the finish line a mile away. He could also see other mushers, three, maybe four. Which meant forty behind him. But what did these forty matter? What mattered was that,

so close to the end, he was not leading. What mattered was that he was not going to win the race. And he was so tired, his dogs beyond tired, so tired they would have collapsed if he was to relent.
"Mush!" the sold word left that could feed them, dogs and master both, with the will to travel on (3-4).

The only difference between the two passages is the actual mention of the race. Gabriel is the one dying here. For him there is no race, it is simply a beginning, during, and end, but his beginning was linked to his father winning the race. The circle is therefore completing itself.

Strength. Willpower. Endurance. Did he have enough? Did he have any? Did his dogs?
"Mush!" Gabriel cried to his lead dog, "Faster, Tiger-Tiger, mush!"
And then a darkness came upon him, creeping up behind him from the depths of the roaring in his ears. And at the distant end of this new darkness appeared the small, flickering flame. Growing larger with each ripple, the white flame began to hum, a note so pure human ears could never have been meant to hear it. Then the presence took an outline - the caribou hunter could discern a cape, fold after fold of white fur (304, italics in the original text).

Gabriel is now referred to as "the caribou hunter", which has been used all throughout the book to name his father Abraham. This occurs not only during the race in the first chapter, but multiple times after that, both during contemporary events and in the brothers' childhood memories. He becomes his father. The generations are blurred, mixed, made uncertain, and irrelevant. He catches a glimpse of the Fur Queen, the benevolent spirit who sparked his conception and followed him throughout his life. This announces to the reader that the end of the race is near, and that Gabriel will soon cross the finish line.

The caribou hunter thought he saw a crown, made of white fur, hovering above the cape. And the crown sparkled and flashed with what could have been an entire constellation of stars. Then Gabriel Okimasis saw a sash, like an elongated flag, white, satin, draped across the bodice of a young woman so fair her skin looked chiseled from arctic frost, her teeth pearls of ice, lips streaks of blood, the eyes white flames in a pitch-black night (305, italics in the original text).

The Fur Queen, who followed the two boys all throughout their lives and who also followed their father since the night the boys were conceived, is now coming back to accompany Gabriel to his death. She was responsible for the spark that ignited the conception of both boys, and she gave their father the silver cup (even referred to as a womb) into which they fell when they were born:

This creature of unearthly beauty, the Fur Queen, was wafting towards him with something in her arms, something round and made of silver, carrying the object at waist level, like a sacred vessel, a heart perhaps, a lung, a

> womb? [...] He had won. He was the king of all the legions of dog-mushers, the champion of the world! [...] And then the Fur Queen's lips began descending. Down they came, fluttering, like a leaf from an autumn birch, until they came to rest on Abraham's left cheek. There. (11).

The Fur Queen is bringing back the silver cup, and she is giving Gabriel the kiss she gave his father decades earlier.

> *The creature of unearthly beauty was floating towards him carrying something in her arms, something round and made of silver, carrying the object at waist level, like a sacred vessel, like an organ, a heart perhaps, a lung, a womb? He was the champion of the world. And then the Queen's lips descended. Down they came, fluttering, like a leaf from an autumn tree, until they came to rest if only for a moment, though he wanted it to last a thousand years, on Gabriel Okimasis's left cheek. There*" (306, italics in the original text).

We find traditional features of the Gothic in numerous recent Indigenous novels, including in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which includes the story of a past which haunts the present. The use of Indigenous supernatural creatures in these books, and different spheres of horror and haunting are, however, very specific to these Indigenous writings. They cover topics such as ongoing colonialism, inter-generational trauma, and cultural survivance. In these Indigenous novels, the use of traditional monsters shifts the focus of terror onto the uninterrupted processes of colonialism in Canada and the United States.

Anxiety over the past which haunts the present is particularly apparent in the loops and repetitions between conception, life, and death of the protagonists, as well as in the constant flashbacks and memories of trauma and abuse. For all the characters, familial heritage and colonization are intertwined in painful ways that affect their life and future. Their situation is symbolic of the present set of circumstances of First Nation, Métis and Inuit in Canada, and Native Americans in the United States. Within the politics of healing and reconciliation that seem to occupy the activist, social, and political spheres today, these Indigenous Gothic novels bring forward an unusual view on what needs to be done. They are the fictional images of a reality. What is "just a book" has the argumentative potential to express indigenous peoples' views on what they want and need to heal and prosper. The original Gothic novels of the 18th century emerged from social anxiety and a desire for change, and expressed it through the language of scary monsters haunting helpless young people. Today's indigenous peoples are not helpless, but they are frightened and demanding of a chance for healing and renewal. Gabriel's death is not an end, but a new beginning. He returns to the sacred womb of his Creator, and will be reborn with the upcoming generation of Cree boys, who will no longer suffer in residential schools. This new generation will retain their language and traditions, and will carry on the stories of their ancestors under the benevolent watch of the Fur Queen. The Fur Queen appearing to Gabriel on his deathbed represents the need for a withdrawal from polluted, colonized spaces, and for a return to Cree traditions, in order for the new generation to heal:

> Below the Fur Queen portrait, Mariesis's rosary lay entwined in Gabriel's fingers. Ann-Adele Ghostrider's old, brown hand removed the beads and replaced them with an eagle feather.
> "*Mush*, Tiger-Tiger!" (303)

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