

(Non)Translation as Resistance in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

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Translated individuals, like Tomson Highway, chart new territory all the while forging a new literary language with their writing. But Highway is not of the migrant postcolonial Rushdiean kind. Rather, he emerges from a violent and still very present Canadian colonial reality lived by Indigenous Peoples, as attested more than ever today by the growing body of literature (both fiction and non-fiction) written and published by Indigenous authors and settler-scholars. The institutional politics behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, as well as the on-going National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, speak to the colonial/imperial directive, described more recently as genocide¹, followed with such fervent determination by Europeans from the moment they set foot on Turtle Island.

With this in mind, how does one then go about deciphering a new literary language? First, there is the issue of language proper; in the case of Highway, his mother tongue is Cree, followed closely by Dene, or Chipewyan. His 1998 novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, however, was written in English. In it, Highway liberally inserts Cree words, phrases and expressions in italics, often followed by their meaning in English. A short bilingual Cree-English glossary (pages 307-10) was also added at the end, and the novel includes two “general notes on the Cree language” (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 310) and an editor’s note about the glossary in the acknowledgement section (unnumbered pages at the beginning of the novel). However, the question asked above regards not just linguistic inquiry but also the initial position the asker must adopt in order to avoid appropriating or transforming the material to suit their own perception of its meaning. I am not Cree, nor Indigenous. I am for all intents and purposes a settler-scholar. To process Highway’s writing from this vantage point is to adopt an observational stance from which unsettling is key; a space where otherwise familiar academic terms must be redefined (or more clearly defined) in order to address, and in this case with the intention to avoid, “the increasing co-optation of discourses of reconciliation by a hegemonic network of institutions and agents” (Pauline Wakeham, qtd. in McCall 57).

Following a brief description of Tomson Highway’s novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, this paper will investigate its translatory nature from three points of view: 1) the insertion of Cree lexical

¹ “The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as “cultural genocide.” This quote can be found on page 1 of the Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada). For additional sources regarding the cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, see MacDonald and Hudson 2012; Milloy 2017; Neu and Therrien 2005; Palmater 2014.

items/elements in the text; 2) the use of Cree mythology within the narrative; 3) the linguistic challenge of cultural contact within the story itself. It will conclude by advancing that Indigenous texts, like Highway's, are forging new literary languages not unlike what Henri Meschonnic proposed with his notion of *langue-culture*. But first, the terminology used throughout the paper will be scrutinized to avoid any definitional ambiguity.

Far from postcolonial theories that dissolve identity into an assimilationist amalgam, I propose to use the term hybridity as a targeted textual form of resistance. In order for this to be possible, the main features of the concept with an emphasis on its difficult relation to Indigeneity will be exposed. The strength of the reading is in part correlated to my capacity to see through the discourse of colonialism and ethnocentrism, in other words my ability to unsettle² myself. Translation and textual hybridity are the key notions around which the analysis will evolve and will range from their inter- and intra-linguistic functions to their capacity to reorganize cultural referents.

In his article "Tending to Ourselves," Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair³ argues for a very vigilant use of the term hybridity when discussing anything Indigenous as it often plays right into the colonial objective of dismantling and erasing Native identities. The motivation behind its use here is borne of a need to establish a link between a particular kind of translation (vertical translation, which will be defined in the following paragraph) and the narrative strategies found in Tomson Highway's novel. It is not used as a way "to undermine Native sovereignty," and as I am not myself an Indigenous person, I will not take the liberty to "[conceive] of [it as] imaginative forms of identity creation, in which boundaries are flexible and colonial realities can be subverted with little fear of punishment or reprisal" (Sinclair 248). While this problematic and very real interpretation remains a part of the term's historical meaning, essentially by way of postcolonial critical thought, hybridity in the context of the text and this article is understood as a form of indissoluble Cree resistance. Far from reflecting a symmetrical process that syncretizes identity into a homogenous mixture, its power here lies in its capacity to deal with the issue of untranslatability.

The term vertical translation has been attached to at least two definitions. Folena defines it as translation from a more prestigious language to a vernacular one in the context of Medieval writing (Das). Coming at it from a social sciences angle, Schaeffer et al. anchor its meaning within the actual process of translation where "[d]uring vertical translation, the ST [source text] is in an abstract form which is not language specific. The TT [target text] is produced on the basis of these abstract representations" (Schaeffer et al. 1). This second definition comes closer to what I am attempting to describe here by advancing that the source text is not necessarily an accessible document. In the context of this paper, the term vertical translation will be used to refer to the

² Unsettling oneself is a process through which "non-Natives must struggle to confront their own colonial mentality, moral indifference, and historical ignorance." (Regan and Alfred x)

³ The author has changed the spelling of his first name since publishing this article. After having discussed the matter with him, I am using the current spelling here. See references at the back for the name under which the article was originally published.

process a multilingual author undergoes when he or she writes; in other words, the transformation or conversion of their thought process into a linear literary text. When written in a language other than the author's mother tongue, the text produced is a sort of translation, and will be referred to here as the "first translation."

In keeping with this idea, the process a multilingual individual goes through in order to put words into writing needs clarifying. James McGuire's definition of the bilingual subject will serve as a starting point: "[...] any act of writing carries with it all the complications of establishing a geopolitically-grounded language. [...] The bilingual subject is perpetually adrift between languages, vacillating from one to the other, subject to permanent indecisiveness" (107). What McGuire disregards completely here is the importance of the mother tongue and its capacity to geopolitically anchor the bilingual subject. The "permanent indecisiveness" he refers to is not the result of the subject's aimless drifting, but of untranslatability, in other words of not being able to formulate exactly the mother tongue's meanings and history in another language. This concept is clearly understood by Billy Merasty, Cree actor and playwright, and Tomson Highway's nephew, when he discusses his bilingualism and the use of English versus Cree in his own writing:

[I]t's very hard to give something that a lot of people can't get because it's not their own language. And it's very hard to give something that's very hard to translate because what you're giving can't be fully translated — so there's always something left behind... You can't really strike a balance. You just do the best you can. (Fagan 26)

I will refer to a text produced in this space of (cultural and linguistic) untranslatability as a hybrid one.

Translation studies (TS) researchers have defined hybrid texts several ways over time and these definitions involve the use of both source and target languages and cultures (Snell-Hornby 208). Through contact with postcolonial research and other disciplines, TS has come to refine the definition. For Sherry Simon,

The hybridity that concerns Translation Studies belongs to a tradition of debate having to do with plurilingualism and linguistic creolization, notions of transculturalism and transtextualization, as well as aspects of diasporic cultural expression that include bilingualism and double consciousness. (Simon 49)

A hybrid text "is in some sense already a translation" (51), meaning it is not necessarily a product of an external word-to-word transfer. In other words, an original text can be considered a first translation, as implied earlier. But what is relevant for this paper is that this kind of text "has created a 'new language' and has come to occupy a space 'in between'" (Snell-Hornby 208). Cree scholar Neal McLeod alludes to this very thing when he writes that "[t]he space-in-between is where people make sense of their worlds; it is the location wherein they situate their consciousness" (McLeod 24). Although transpiring from a postcolonial conceptual framework, the most significant

aspect of this definition of hybridity is its generative capability, in the form of a new language. Through it, traditional language binarity is faulted, and one is forced to ask what constitutes the source language, as well as what then should become the target one. But is this really a necessary question? French TS theorist Henri Meschonnic defined language (*langue*) as “a system of language [*langage*] that identifies the inextricable mix between a culture, a literature, a people, a nation, individuals, and what they do with this mix”⁴ (*Poétique du traduire* 12, my translation). Language contains the history and the culture of the people who use it, as well as the moment in history from whence they speak. Meschonnic refers to this as a *langue-culture*. Even the individual speaker’s body is inflected in the language he or she uses: “writing is a practice where the writer does more than enunciate. He writes himself. [...] There is in this cry, a constraint, in writing: one writes with his or her whole body”⁵ (*Pour la poétique* 183, my translation). In light of Meschonnic’s thoughts, we must reconsider hybridity as an aimlessly drifting mix of social, cultural and historical elements, as McGuire suggested, and see it rather as a continuous function of the speaker’s history, society and culture.

It is through a form of translation that the hybrid text takes on a cultural, linguistic and personal presence. If, in translation, the textual relation between two texts is decentered, as opposed to annexed (where provenance of the original is erased), Meschonnic writes that the work “becomes double, a doubleness that is the inside-outside of a language and its literature”⁶ (*Pour la poétique* 360, my translation). Meschonnic’s notion of decenteredness is not just emblematic of a semantic misalignment between source and target, rather it has to do with having an “interpoetic relation between value and signification, the structuring of subject and history”⁷ (“Propositions” 53, my translation). When translating (or when writing a hybrid text, in the case of a first translation), decentering is a way of maintaining the doubleness present in the text, whereas annexation is homogenizing the language in the text, flattening it, and giving in to acculturation.

So, what then are the linguistic elements that best describe a hybrid text? TS researcher Sherry Simon puts forth the following definition that speaks to the conflictual space of the border and is steeped in the notion of translation:

Hybrid texts are those that display “translation effects”: dissonances, interferences, disparate vocabulary, a lack of cohesion, unconventional syntax, a certain “weakness” or “deterritorialization”. This mixing can be expressed either at the level of linguistic codes or more broadly at the level of cultural or historical references. (Simon 50)

⁴ “La langue est le système du langage qui identifie le mélange inextricable entre une culture, une littérature, un peuple, une nation, des individus, et ce qu’ils en font.” (Meschonnic, *Poétique du traduire* 12)

⁵ “L’écriture est une pratique où l’écrivain fait plus que s’énoncer. Il s’écrit. [...] Il y a du cri, une contrainte, dans l’écriture : on écrit avec son corps entier.” (Meschonnic, *Pour la poétique* 2 183)

⁶ “[...] elle devient cette œuvre double, ce *dedans-dehors* d’une langue et de sa littérature.” (*Pour la poétique* 2 360)

⁷ “[...] *décentrement*, rapport interpoétique entre valeur et signification, structuration d’un sujet et histoire [...]” (Meschonnic, “Propositions pour une poétique de la traduction” 53)

Simon's description continues with: "While the hybrid text affirms the dividedness of identity, often becoming an expression of loss and disorientation, it can also become a powerful and emancipatory place for the writer to occupy" (50). The first part of this last sentence, as stated, is problematic in the way it undermines the primacy of a specific identity. The word 'dividedness' offers no information as to the way it is divided, giving the impression it could very well be symmetrically. Alternatively, I believe the "translation effects" expressed in the hybrid text can be indicative of the traceable journey of a powerful identity, while its capacity to "disorient" the non-initiated reader is a sign of its strength, which dovetails nicely with Simon's "powerful and emancipatory place for the writer to occupy."

It is with this understanding of translation and hybridity that Tomson Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* will be broached. Due to my non-Cree, settler-scholar status, my optics have an obvious inherent bias, one to which I own up. But I also want to add that "[the] critical posture I endeavor to occupy as a non-Native [non-Indigenous] critic of Native [Indigenous] literature [...] is that of the ally" (McKegney 63), along with all the possible criticism that comes with this stance.

Kiss of the Fur Queen is about two Cree brothers, Champion (baptized Jeremiah) and Ooneemetoow (baptized Gabriel), sons of Abraham Okimasis, champion dog sled racer, and Mariesis and the journey of their lives southward from their community of Eemanapiteepitat, in northern Manitoba, to Birch Lake Indian Residential School, and finally to the cities of Winnipeg and Toronto. The novel opens with a dreamlike sequence during which their father, Abraham, wins the famous Millington Cup at the World Championship Dog Derby held in Oopaskooyak, Manitoba. It is here that the reader is introduced to the Fur Queen, a mythical creation (associated with either the Weetigo or the Weesageechak⁸) who will make regular appearances throughout the novel under different guises. The boys, Jeremiah first, as he is the eldest, leave their community to attend Birch Lake Indian Residential School. The Okimasis brothers, while they do come home every summer, will stay there until the end of elementary school. Over the course of their stay, the boys will be sexually abused by the priests who run the school. Highway's descriptions of pedophile rape clearly bring to light "the terror of colonial institutions" (Henderson, qtd. in McCall 63) and its horrors in a prison-like atmosphere where the children are forced to cut themselves off from any connection to their culture, family and home.⁹ The young brothers witness each other being abused and the "chocolate bar" left behind for services rendered becomes a well-placed religious symbol in other parts of the novel. In this toxic environment, the one means of self-expression left for the

⁸ Weesageechak is the Trickster's Cree name, and the Weetigo, "a cannibalistic creature in Cree mythology" (Fagan 2009).

⁹ On this point, Tomson Highway seems to hold an unclear position on his own residential school experience, one that has created some controversy over the last few years. Comments regarding his years in residential schools in a 2015 *Huffington Post* article (Ostroff), and in a 2010 interview on *Rockburn Presents* (cpac), depict a very different reality from the one described in the novel analysed here. These assertions, verging surprisingly on the extremely positive, have fueled a backlash that has been following him ever since, and have yet to be commented upon by him. The instrumentalisation of his comments by those seeking to undermine the work of the TRC specifically, and more generally Canada's role in the cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples keep appearing in the media. (Brake; Meloney)

brothers to explore is artistic—Champion/Jeremiah as a musician, a piano player to be precise, and Ooneemeetoo/Gabriel as a dancer, talents with which both were born (Gabriel’s Cree name, Ooneemeetoo, translates as dancer in the novel’s glossary, and Jeremiah used to play his father’s accordion as a child).

Following residential school, Jeremiah moves to the city of Winnipeg to pursue music studies. After grueling years of very lonely piano practice and training, his path leads him to a prestigious piano competition where he wins first prize and the Crookshank Memorial Trophy. And while the event seems to mirror, in a decentered way, his father winning the famous “Millington Cup World Championship Dog Derby” before his birth, the outcomes are incommensurable, for Jeremiah turns to drinking upon realizing the accomplishment means very little in the way of changing who he is:

He had tried. Tried to change the meaning of his past, the roots of his hair, the colour of his skin, but he was one of them. What was he to do with Chopin? Open a conservatory on Eemanapiteepitat hill? Whip its residents into the Cree Philharmonic Orchestra? (Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* 215)

The overwhelming presence of urban Western values that now surround him and the dogmatically learned Catholic ones instilled in his childhood all come crashing down on him. He is unable to reconcile all that he has done to succeed in the past few years with his Cree identity and background, the two spaces are just too distant, simply poles apart.

As for Gabriel, his dancing and choreography skills combined with his training enable him to become a famous dancer the world over. His perfect physical appearance, alluded to already in residential school, has also allowed him to indulge in promiscuous sexual behaviour. His quest is centered around finding his next sexual fix wherever and from whatever man he can, as well as leveraging his sexual services for money and even for marketing advice to help out with his brother’s play at one point in the story (283). This is how Gabriel wields his power over others, a power he learned about as a child at Birch Lake Indian Residential School at the hands of Father Lafleur, and to which he is clearly addicted:

Gabriel had no strength left. The pleasure in his centre welled so deep that he was about to open his mouth and swallow whole the living flesh—in his half-dream state, this man nailed to the cross was a living breathing man, tasting like Gabriel’s most favourite food, warm honey [...]. (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 79)

The Okimasis brothers’ artistic practice, heavily influenced at first by the religious and institutional oppression of residential school, becomes, as they evolve into adults, a powerful means of re-Creeifying themselves in an urban environment. Gabriel choreographs a dance to his brother’s music, gaining much critical attention for both:

And suddenly, the piano was a powwow drum propelling a Cree Round Dance with the clangour and dissonance of the twentieth century. (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 267)

Later, Jeremiah writes a play, “so controversial that the cardinal of Toronto had snuck into the show dressed as a Rosedale matron, so Indian rumour rabidly insisted” (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 296), putting the Okimasis brothers in the limelight a second time. But after years of unprotected and indiscriminate sex, Gabriel finds out he is dying of AIDS. The energy that the play’s lead role requires has taken a fatal toll on his health. With their father now dead, the brothers’ mother, Mariesis Okimasis, completes for the first time in her life the long journey to Winnipeg to see her youngest son before he dies. The novel ends on the total reclaiming of Cree beliefs at Gabriel’s request in the hour of his death, much to Mariesis’ distress. The last sacraments of the Catholic faith she so wanted her youngest to receive will not materialize. Jeremiah guards the hospital room door while Gabriel is surrounded by those who are performing a traditional Cree ceremony:

Ann-Adele Ghostrider lit a tiny sprig of cedar—after sweetgrass, sage, and tobacco, the fourth sacred herb—and one last puff of rose smoke. Jeremiah stood with his back against the door, his mother biting his restraining hand. For God had finally come for his brother, banging at the door, demanding to be let in. (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 305)

As to the structure of Tomson Highway’s novel, it is broken down into six parts, all of which are titled with Italian terms that describe how various pieces of classical music should be played.¹⁰ But it is divided further into very short, numbered chapters. Each of these details, chronologically, a series of important events that mark the brothers’ lives, quite literally from the womb to the grave, in the case of Gabriel.

Three Narrative Strategies

The first narrative strategy considered is the insertion of Cree lexical items and phrases throughout the novel. The lexical elements (and the corresponding glossary) range from swear words (“Atimootagay—dog’s cunt (common swear word)” (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 307)), to many more culturally specific ones (“Machipoowamoowin—bad dream power (a very powerful term)” and “Mithoopoowamoowin—good dream power (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 307)), as well as banal phrases (“Mati siwitagan—pass the salt” (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 308)). For the non-Cree reader, this technique of linguistic insertion imposes an immediate cultural otherness so incomprehensible that it requires either the intervention of a native speaker of Cree, or at the very least a bilingual glossary, in order to understand what is being communicated on the most basic semantic level. This doubling of reader positionality maintains two linguistic and cultural realities (English and Cree, notwithstanding the extremely codified language of classical music by way of Italian) on the surface and in constant interaction. As Fagan writes,

¹⁰ Allegro ma non troppo, Andante cantabile, Allegretto grazioso, Molto agitato, Adagio espressivo, Presto con fuoco.

[b]y code-switching, jumping back and forth between various languages and styles, they [Indigenous writers] challenge the dominance of any one language. By keeping the reader “off balance,” the writers bring their language choices to the reader’s conscious attention, refuting the transparency of language and reminding us of the powers of language: to disrupt, confuse, exclude as well as to include, inform, and amuse. (“Code-Switching Humour in Aboriginal Literature” 26)

In an interview with Tomson Highway, Heather Hodgson confirms what Fagan writes by saying this about Highway’s code-switching in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*: “his frequent use of Cree words and phrases does not only convey the identity of the novel’s author and characters, it also subverts the dominant language itself because Highway’s stamp is on it—he forges his own idiosyncratic vocabulary just as a strong writer on the margins should” (Hodgson). Most tellingly, the meaning of the dedication at the beginning of the novel, *Igwani igoosi, n’semis*, can be found neither in the novel, nor in the accompanying bilingual glossary. Only by searching online did I discover it meant more or less “for you little brother,” and even this interpretation does not cover its complete meaning (Hodgson) as the three Cree words convey much more than the four corresponding English ones. The novel’s glossary allows the non-Cree (and non-Indigenous) reader to get a semantic gist of most of the terms, but in no way can it assist the reader in grasping the deeper nature of the Cree language and the cultural information it contains. Highway says:

“Cree, unlike English, is a laughing language” and adds later on: “The hardest part I find in the translation process is that the English language is not terribly funny. It’s a language of the head, it’s a cerebral language, it works from up here. Cree is a very visceral, physical language, an instinctual language...” (Hodgson)

When Hodgson follows this statement with “[y]ou mean it’s very connected to the body,” Highway immediately acquiesces with “Yes... and to the earth” (Hodgson). Interestingly, Meschonnic’s thoughts, cited earlier, on the involvement of the whole body in the process of writing is mirrored in Highway’s own words: one writes oneself into existence.

Whether this process is seen as happening within the parameters of Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of a contact zone (Pratt) or postcolonialism’s liminal in-between space, in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* the reader is privy to Highway’s linguistic, cultural and personal appropriation of English by the Cree language. This results in a hybrid text that keeps alive and presents not only the language’s underlying humorous nature within the English language, but also a musicality which Highway says is an integral part of the Cree language, an aspect that I suspect must have also participated in his classical musical training.¹¹ Part of this work occurs directly in English by piercing it with Cree words. Of English, Highway writes: “we are very conscious of the fact that we are working with a language that we must reshape to our own particular purpose” (“On Native Mythology” 421). Very

¹¹ For an in-depth look at the use of classical music in Highway’s text, see “Productive Dissonance: Classical Music in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*” by Sarah Wylie Krotz (2009).

much in line, here again, with the idea of a *langue-culture* and its historical and cultural specificities, I suggest the insertions carry with them Cree culture, Cree nationhood, as well as Highway's own Creeness.

However, providing the reader a bilingual glossary at the end of the novel as well as translating many of the words directly in the text seems to go against this "reshaping" by giving it an ethnological feel. Hodgson states: "While the glossary orients the reader and enables [sic] the reader a glimpse of the humour, it also undercuts Highway's linguistic subversion by annihilating precisely the sense of the otherness of the other" (Hodgson). But Highway's priority seems to lie elsewhere; he seems to fear the impact the lack of understanding might have on those who do not speak Cree. He could be acknowledging this in the narrative itself when he makes the protagonist Jeremiah question precisely this in reference to the play he is writing: "He suspected that his liberal sprinklings of Cree might have thrown off its readers" (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 278). Is Highway privileging semantic understanding, however inadequate, over a puzzling introduction to Cree for the non-Cree audience? The triple effect created by italicized text, immediately followed by its translation and a glossary at the end of the novel to explain most of the Cree lexical items and expressions seems to indicate this. But does it really? Looking at the novel as a translation offers different possibilities.

Interestingly, "according to Genette paratextual elements are positioned in an 'undefined zone', occupying an ambiguous position both inside and outside of the text" (Toledano Buendía 149) and can "turn into metadiscourses containing explicit theoretical statements about translation norms and a translator's decision-making process" (150), thereby allowing the translator's voice to become visible. One could argue that Highway, as a "first" translator, is using his novel's paratextual elements (the glosses, glossary, as well as opening and closing notes) as a way to triple the impact of the presence of Cree. Even if the underlying cultural meaning remains opaque for the non-Cree and non-Indigenous reader, the Cree language itself partially reclaims not only its territory, but does so visibly by the italicization of Cree words, their repetition (Cree words are very often followed by their English counterparts) and then insertion in the adjacent glossary. In addition to this, the novel opens with "Notes on the Trickster," in which facts regarding the non-gendered aspect of the language are divulged. And following the glossary, two short notes that convey information about grammar (again regarding the lack of gender markings in Cree) and pronunciation ('g' is pronounced hard) have been added. Conceiving of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as a first translation situates the work as a target text, and as such "[i]t is the target text's implicit reader that the translator's notes [or in the case of Highway's novel, the English counterparts to the Cree directly in the text, the glossary and the notes] are addressed to, which makes them a determining factor in the presence, use and message of this paratextual material" (154).

In conclusion, Highway's paratextual technique seems to go beyond a pandering "didactic intent" (Owens 22) by making the target reader (if the novel is analyzed as a translated text) come face to face with cultural information that, while disorienting or partially understood, is not foreignized exotically, but rather presented in a way that forces him or her to acquiesce to its

necessary presence in the narrative and the complexity of its make-up. Superficially, the novel's hybridity can be understood as a physical mix of two languages, and two worldviews, but it is the way in which the Cree is inserted and the importance put on tripling its presence that acts as a potent message of existence, permanence and endurance.

A second and connected narrative strategy addressed in this paper is the insertion of Cree mythology into the novel's narrative. Highway seamlessly weaves fantastic elements and anecdotes into the storyline in a way that does not interrupt the narrative's more realistic continuity. Mythological elements glide almost surreptitiously into the narrative at crucial moments in the lives of the protagonists and once there, take on a larger than life presence, creating dreamlike atmospheres. The effect is cinematic and the imagery is vivid and descriptive, not unlike magic realism. And while real knowledge of Cree mythology remains unattainable for the non-Indigenous reader through these passages, its presence is clearly felt and is marked as such by these fantastic¹² episodes. As Highway declares himself, a prime example of this is Abraham's meeting of the Fur Queen at the beginning of the novel after winning the World Championship Dog Derby (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 6–12). The event is real, but Abraham proceeds to go in and out of two consciousnesses: first, the events surrounding his winning the cup (crowds roaring, flashbulbs going off, beauty pageant winner handing him the large silver bowl); second, his passage through three different "darknesses" where he sees a small flickering flame in the distance. The syrupy flow of the narrative between these two realities connects and confuses them into each other. Natural events become distorted and take on a supernatural feel.

Another such passage is when Jeremiah slips into a drunken stupor resulting from a drinking binge in Kookoos Cook's kitchen following his father's funeral (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 231–34). After venturing outside, trying to escape Filament Bumperville's charged rifle, he slips into what he describes as a fog, then an endless tunnel where he finally sees a flame. A voice wakens him from his stupor by giggling: "Sometimes you humans make me laugh" (231). And the reader is privy to a conversation between Jeremiah and "Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap-oh-you-should-hear-the-things-they-call-me-honeypot-Sees" (234), the ultimate trickster.

Created by descriptive images of white fox stoles and white satin gloves, in a way marking her creation, both the colour white and a feminine presence come to be associated with the character of the Fur Queen. In the novel, "The Fur Queen, as the most prominent incarnation of the Trickster [...], follows the Okimasis brothers [...] to the city. She flickers in the text like a flame. Sometimes she makes us laugh; other times her guise provokes and startles" (Hodgson). The importance of Weesageechak, the name of the trickster in Cree, is acknowledged at the outset in "A

¹² The term *fantastic* is used in this paper with regard to the description of events in the novel that, while clearly occurring in the characters' consciousnesses, do not have a concrete manifestation in reality; they are considered supernatural: e.g. "Jesus on the wall above the piano winked, and an idea rang like a gong" (133); "Twenty-seven months' pregnant now, her belly protruding ten feet, translucent, something inside stabbing, slashing, only the skull vaguely human" (216).

Note on the Trickster.” Highway informs the reader that the trickster’s role “is to teach us about the nature and meaning of existence on the planet Earth” and Weesageechak¹³ “straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit” (2005). Highway clearly illustrates the conjunction of reality and the fantastic in the narration of his novel, forging a link for the non-Indigenous reader between the latter and mythology. Highway defends the possibility when he argues that “for Native Literature to achieve any degree of universal resonance or relevance, any degree of permanence, Indian Mythology must lie at its very root” (“On Native Mythology” 423). But ancient Cree mythology must travel through time and in space to become intelligible in today’s contemporary world. For Highway, the transformation or “hybridization” of the myth occurs when it is taken out of the land and brought to the city:

The only thing is, this mythology has to be re-worked somewhat if it is to be relevant to us Indians living in today’s world. The way these stories go, they were meant for a people who lived in a forest environment; we—our family—were all born in tents, grew up travelling by dog-sled and canoe, etc. But today, as a adult [sic], I am urban by choice. So in order for these myths to be relevant to my life, to my own system of spiritual beliefs, I have to apply these myths, this mythology to the realities of city living. So, ‘Weesageechak’ the trickster figure who stands at the very centre of Cree mythology and who is a figure as important to Cree culture as Christ is to Western culture, still hangs around and about the lakes and forests of northern Manitoba, yes, but he also takes strolls down Yonge Street, drinks beer, sometimes passes out at the Silver Dollar and goes shopping at the Eaton Centre. (421)

The Cree trickster’s presence alongside twenty and twenty-first century city living in Highway’s novel conforms to what Gerald Vizenor describes as a tribal narrative in which “the trickster is a comic trope, chance in a narrative wisp, tribal discourse and an irreversible innovation in literature” (9). Vizenor takes up Todorov (on Bakhtin) to explain this phenomenon: “There are events that, in principle, cannot unfold on the plane of a single and unified consciousness, but presuppose two consciousnesses that do not fuse; they are events whose essential and constitutive element is the relation of a consciousness to another consciousness, precisely because it is other” (Vizenor 9). On one hand, we have Cree consciousness with its mythology (and squarely within it, the central place of Weesageechak), and on the other hand, we have Crees living in a contemporary urban environment. Highway makes both these consciousnesses inhabit the same physical space, and, without one “fusing” into the other, the reader is able to distinguish between them as the narrative flows between reality and the fantastic. For Bakhtin, in order to have hybridity, “it is obligatory for two linguistic consciousnesses to be present, the one being represented and the other doing the representing, with each belonging to a different system of language” (Bakhtin 359). One example of this is the dual image of Lola van Beethoven as Jeremiah’s piano teacher (doing the representing) and as Weesageechak (being represented by her); or, more abstractly, the dreamlike appearances of Weesageechak on various occasions where, under the guises of the Fur Queen, she

¹³ Since there are no genders in Cree, we have chosen to repeat the trickster’s name in order to avoid using pronouns based on the settler heteronormative male/female binary.

becomes an alternate consciousness whispering hellish memories to Jeremiah (286-7) or inhabiting Gabriel's dreams (297).

For the non-Native reader, the supernatural occurrences in the novel act as a link to the unknown Cree mythological world without necessarily providing any information about it other than what can be intuited. The use of the fantastic to open a space of double consciousness, in effect associating the metalinguistic (the effect of inserting Cree in the novel and its connected paratextual elements) with the juxtaposition of realism and myth, further positions Highway as a translator who is aware of the dilemma of untranslatability.

The third and final translatory narrative strategy employed by Highway in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* involves the two main protagonists and how they react to both Cree and English, linguistically and culturally. The strategy helps non-Indigenous readers grasp the extent of the crossing required to leap back and forth between a Cree-language environment and an English-language one. Occurring in descriptive passages and dialogues, the alternation between language situations and surroundings as well as the textual context in which it is found need no ulterior explanation in the novel; they speak for themselves, through the characters' experiences. This cultural instability marks the narrative with proof of the untranslatability of culture as carried out by language, much in the same way the paratextual elements in the novel (the glossary, the two general notes that follow it and the preliminary "Note on the Trickster" at the beginning of the novel) demonstrate its linguistic differences. I have included here a limited number of examples.

One of the first linguistic incidents can be found early in the novel when the reader is privy to Abraham's thoughts as he reawakens from a trance-like state after crossing the finish line of the dog-sled race in first place: "Men with notepads and pencils, women with pens and large red moving mouths, prying, babbling in this language of the Englishman, hard, filled with sharp, jagged angles" (6). This physical description depicts English as a dangerous object, like broken glass, able to injure someone if not handled carefully. The sound of the language is interpreted by Abraham, as he does not understand its meaning. A little further on the same page, there is the "boom, boom" (of a voice) and two pages later, through more of Abraham's thoughts, again the volume of this strange shaped language is noted as the mayor "trumpets" and "booms" into a microphone. The description of the English language as a completely foreign object and as noise erects a wall of strange violent sounds and incomprehension.

For Jeremiah and Gabriel, experiencing English happens on a very different level from that of their father. They have to learn it in residential school where it is barbarically forced onto them. Here, the boys are forbidden to speak their mother tongue: "Now Jeremiah. You know you're not to speak Cree once you're off the plane.' Jeremiah felt a choke breaking against his throat" (*Kiss of the Fur Queen* 70). Phonetic mimicking (by copying the priests) is how they learn English. This striking example portrays Gabriel reciting the Hail Mary before going to bed:

‘Hello merry, mutter of cod, play for ussinees, now anat tee ower of ower beth, aw, men.’ Gabriel rattled off the nonsensical syllables as nimbly as he could, pretending he knew what they meant. [...] He couldn’t help but wonder why the prayer included a Cree word ‘ussinees.’ What need did this mutter of cod have of a pebble? (71)

Again, sound is at the heart of the experience, but there is an attempt on the part of Gabriel to make sense of the sound, as it is perceived as a language and not simply as noise, like it was for his father. Gabriel’s confusion, born out of an attempt to untangle sound and meaning while only having his mother tongue as reference, is explicitly understood.

For the Okimasis brothers, English as they come to know it is the language of the clergy, of sexual abuse, of separation, alienation and pain, and of a world that cannot find correspondence in their mother tongue, and perhaps even any Native language at that. But it also “suggests that [its use]—the language of the rapist—appears to be a tool of *distanciation*”¹⁴ (Henzi 83, my translation) which helps the brothers keep separate their residential school experiences from their home life, maintaining in effect both worlds intact and ununitable:

[Gabriel] decided to show off the English he had learned in his year at Birch Lake School. ‘Do ‘machipooowamoowin’ mean what Father Lafleur do to the boys at school?’ Although he wanted to tickle his brother with this light-hearted joke, Gabriel’s question ended with an eerie, spectral chuckle that could have popped out of a bubble in his blood. Jeremiah’s words, in English, were as cold as drops from a melting block of ice. ‘Even if we told them, they would side with Father Lafleur.’ Selecting one of the three Native languages that she knew—English would remain, for life, beyond her reach and that of her husband’s—Mariesis turned to Jeremiah. ‘What are you saying, my sons?’ (92)

As this example illustrates, English is the language of secrets and shame, a language that acts as a barrier and, as Anishnabe author and poet Marie Annharte Baker calls it, “an ultimate liar’s language” (62). It imprisons the boys within a territory, a term Louis Owens describes as “imagined and given form by the colonial enterprise in America,” “a place of containment, invented to control and subdue the dangerous potentialities of imagined Indians” (26). By insuring the boys cannot communicate with their parents, the colonial institution has in effect imprisoned them, and can do what they want with them. For the colonizer, “[t]o ‘civilize’ or ‘educate’ was to take over a people’s unique communication system” and the English taught in these schools was done with a goal “to communicate the words and symbols of the dominant society” (Baker 60). In residential school, Jeremiah and Gabriel are contained within this conceptual territory, with no means of escaping the linguistic, religious and physical walls built up around them. But once outside, they are able to reappropriate it through their artistic process, specifically the play written by Jeremiah and played by Gabriel, and in doing so “the initial violence of appropriation, that uses the language of the

¹⁴ [...] suggère que l’utilisation de l’anglais – la langue du violeur – incarne un outil de distanciation.” (Henzi 83)

coloniser, is as such thwarted by the intrinsic violence of reappropriation”¹⁵ (Henzi 84, my translation).

Communication between the Okimasis brothers and their parents (as well as the Cree culture of their childhood) has been irretrievably impaired and altered; by chapter twenty-seven, we learn that Jeremiah and Gabriel have not been back to Eemanapiteepitat in three years. For Jeremiah, the pain of having to put his changed life into words his parents can understand is tainted with unexplainable gaps in meaning. When endeavouring to tell his mother why he does not want to return home, Jeremiah is quickly frustrated linguistically: “How, for God’s sake, did one say ‘concert pianist’ in Cree?” (189). And later, he attempts further: “‘How do you say...’ English today tasted like metal to Jeremiah. ‘How do you say ‘university’? In Cree?’” (191). The association of severe discomfort with metal is not new for Jeremiah. His early sensorial pre-English experience of residential school, right after having had his hair shaved off, is described as smelling of javex and metal (55). The incorporation (quite literally the ingestion within the body) of this smell and taste speaks to the embodiment of English within Jeremiah and how expelling it carries all the weight of this foreignness. And the widening communication breach between his sons and himself is not left unnoticed by Abraham Okimasis: “The signs had not escaped him: visit by visit, word by word, these sons were splintering from their subarctic roots, their Cree beginnings” (193).

Gabriel expresses, near the end of the novel, another moment of inter-linguistic frustration that is a testimony to the chasm that has grown throughout his life between his “Cree beginnings,” to repeat his father’s words, and the life he is now about to depart. He asks his brother: “How do you say AIDS in Cree, huh? Tell me, what’s the word for HIV?” (296). How can he make his mother understand his life now, how can he explain the way in which everything has led him to this very moment? Too much fragmentation has occurred to reconstruct a recognizable image for his mother who is so bound to the Catholic religion that she fears her son will go to hell, quite literally, if he forgoes his last sacraments. Finally, it is his Cree beginnings that will accompany him into death, untethered by language cross-overs, the Catholic religion, or his life. The original Fur Queen is there in the end, just as she was at the beginning for his father, to escort him into what looks like a next life.

To conclude, from a dangerous sounding object, one that is perceived as cacophony by Abraham at the beginning of the novel, the Okimasis brothers’ conceptualization of the English language evolves into its written form during residential school and, unbeknownst to Jeremiah at first, into “‘EVIL’ [...] right at his fingertips” (62). The Okimasis brothers are imprisoned within its confines, unable to communicate the difference in culture to their parents, so unbelievable and cruel it is. But as adults, through Jeremiah’s play *Ulysses Thunderchild*, English becomes a way for both brothers (Jeremiah as the playwright, Gabriel as the main actor) to communicate the evil to the

¹⁵ [...] la violence initiale de l’appropriation, qui utilise la langue du colonisateur, est ainsi mise en échec par la violence intrinsèque de la réappropriation.” (Henzi 84)

audience. Through theatre, the language is spoken with and modulated through the body, transmitting the speaker's history and culture, effectively making it a *langue-culture*.

In this paper, I have attempted to explain the translatory nature of Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* through the use of three specific narrative strategies. An enlarged notion of translation was defined, one that takes into account the idea that within a writer there is a double consciousness or, more plainly, two (or possibly more) consciousnesses. It is the confrontation of these consciousnesses that is at the base of a hybrid space in which elements from both sides are combined to generate something new. The placement and significance of the elements making up this hybridity are what distinguish it from a more homogenous postcolonial definition of the term. Identity is not what comes into question in the case of Highway's novel. Cree identity is not only central, but made to be understood as complex and multi-layered to a non-Indigenous readership that needs to learn to position itself as a listener and a learner rather than a subject used to situating themselves within an imagined and false objectivity.

I suggest that the insertion of italicized Cree words and phrases, their translation directly within the text and an adjoined glossary act as a way to triple the presence of the Cree language for a target readership that is more accustomed to fluent translations. This code-switching phenomenon clearly brings to the fore the untranslatability of certain concepts from Highway's Cree background, culture and mother tongue. In this way, the non-Cree (and by extension, non-Indigenous) reader is forced to recognize and acknowledge the limits of his or her comprehension. The second strategy examined the supernatural and dreamlike occurrences depicted in the narrative as markers of Cree mythology, postulating that it was a way for the non-Indigenous reader to track its presence without necessarily understanding it completely, all the while allowing Highway to explore it in depth. Fuller comprehension is left up to the reader to undertake. Using the trickster (Weegaseechak) as the pivotal element between two consciousnesses, as suggested by Vizenor's reference to Bakhtin, created the mythological conduit able to tie reality to the fantastic. And finally, the linguistic trace of the space between consciousnesses was discerned within the storyline, through the characters themselves. Cultural crossing-over was carved out by language, which played a significant role in the emancipation from the very territory (in Owens' sense) in which it had imprisoned the Okimasis brothers. From its sound as noise at first, to a cultural prison during its coerced learning process, English becomes, once Jeremiah profoundly reconnects to his experience, an ably handled tool by his brother Gabriel, the actor, one which is redirected towards the priests to denounce the abuse suffered at their hands.

Working linguistically and narratively through the untranslatable is to walk the tightrope between cultures. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* interpreted here as a hybrid text exposes the transition from a Cree reality and existence to a hostile institutional space and, finally, an urban (colonial) English-language environment. And as this reality moves through time and space, it is expressed using a new literary language, a *langue-culture*, one that incorporates Cree consciousness by way of its author's body, and his history and culture.

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