

Beauty and Violence in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

Nicole Rogers

Abstract: This paper explores the interplay of beauty and violence in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (2021), emphasizing the novel's role in Indigenous storytelling and resistance to colonial narratives. Highway challenges the "victim-only" narrative by portraying complex, joyful, and humorous Indigenous characters. Highway's poetic prose, juxtaposition, and humor convey Cree resilience amidst trauma, asserting creative sovereignty.

Beauty and violence are atypical counterparts; "beautiful violence" seems oxymoronic. In the context of Indigenous truth and reconciliation, colonial violence is typically recounted in ways that centre the incredible pain, hurt, and victimization of Indigenous peoples. Colonial violence recounted in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (2021) does not minimize the pain and the hurt, or suggest that Indigenous peoples in Canada are not victims—but the beauty in Highway's writing demonstrates that they are much more than just victims. Highway's writing resists the reduction of Indigenous identity to victimhood by portraying characters who experience joy, humor, and resilience alongside trauma. Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew says that Indigenous storytelling "is a medicine that can cure the trauma of colonialism by countering the master narrative" (Thom 201). Storytelling itself is an art form that not only preserves history and culture but also fosters healing through its creative reimagining of Indigenous experience. There is healing in art. Highway's writing tells a story of Cree peoples in a shamelessly ornamented heretical Cree storytelling tradition that resists the plain victim narrative by embracing extravagance, vivid embellishment, and the-

atricality, transforming pain into a rich, layered expression of resilience through poetic joy, juxtaposition, and humour.

The novel's opening section is packed full of joy: joyful moments, relationships, and places. It centres around a happy family. The protagonists, Champion and Ooneemeetoo Okimasis (Jeremiah and Gabriel), are introduced within this context of joy, happiness, and love. This introduction effectively gives them life outside of Christian/colonizer control and provides an image of what they will later lose. The boys have a mother whose eyes are "bottomless wells of love" and they sleep snuggled up with their siblings in a family tent that has a spruce bough carpet (Highway 30). It is clear that the Okimasis family does not have much, but it is also clear that they do not need much, so long as they have a warm, safe place to sleep, something to eat, and their community. Beyond the first section, there are moments of joy sprinkled throughout the novel. Many scholars investigate the importance of the inclusion of joy within narratives that centre Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour. Specifically, the commonly explored term "Black joy" is defined as a recentering of narrative which "allows Black people to be more than their struggles and setbacks, and to see Black folx creativity, imagination, healing, and ingenuity as a vital part of antiracism" (Dunn and Love 69). This idea of highlighting simple positivity as an essential part of someone's story within a historically wronged and racialized group can be used as a framework for what Highway is doing with Indigenous joy. Though the Okimasis brothers experience dehumanizing and cruel treatment at the residential school, these experiences do not define them entirely. Jeremiah frequently finds joy in music. Soon after his arrival at the school, with a freshly shaven head and freshly dried tears, Jeremiah is comforted by a song as "pretty as the song of chickadees in spring," and "like a ripe cloudberry in high July, his heart open[s] up" (Highway 56). The description of his body settling into a peaceful, calm state goes well beyond this small excerpt, granting Jeremiah relief from his frightening new environment. He is more than just one

of “a hundred bald-headed Indian boys” (55) in identical uniforms. Jeremiah is his own person. Highway’s description of joy in music is also an example of poetic prose, utilizing simile and warm words of spring and summer. By surrounding Jeremiah’s moment of happiness with rich, evocative imagery, Highway mirrors how joy itself can be immersive and transformative, offering a sense of freedom even within oppressive circumstances. Such poetic prose emphasizes the character’s joy, adding beauty throughout the novel.

Poetic prose is also prevalent in many moments of juxtaposition. Highway juxtaposes particularly horrific scenes in the novel with undeniable beauty, creating elements of shock and occasional discomfort. The descriptions of the physical violence inflicted on Evelyn Rose McCrae and Madeline Jeanette Lavoix are surprisingly poetic. Jeremiah is haunted by Evelyn Rose, a woman “found in a ditch on the city’s outskirts,” with “a shattered bottle lying gently, like a rose, deep inside her crimson sex” (107). So, Evelyn Rose is brutally assaulted, killed, and carelessly discarded. The violence is clear, and yet so is the unexpected delicacy, which can be read as downplaying what happened. But the bottle is only lying gently; there is no suggestion that it was placed gently. Word choices such as “rose” and “crimson” paint Evelyn Rose as a soft angelic figure, rather than just a brutalized body. Such words give her a sense of beauty, warmth, and vitality, reinforcing that she exists beyond the trauma inflicted upon her. The language preserves her dignity and humanity, allowing space for her to be seen as a full, complex person rather than just a symbol of suffering. Similarly, after Gabriel witnesses Madeline’s assault, he discovers that a screwdriver is “lying gently like a rose” (132) inside of her when her body is found. Though the sharp object is different, this imagery mirrors Evelyn Rose’s assault. Additionally, at the time of Madeline’s assault, Gabriel has a starkly juxtaposing experience. Beautiful description of Gabriel’s sexual pleasure, as he tastes “the essence of warm honey” (132), is placed

between descriptions of Madeline's assault, his gentle experiences sharply contrasting the violence of hers and effectively emphasising the brutality of the sexualized violence. Gabriel and Jeremiah are each haunted by the deaths of Evelyn Rose and Madeline. Jeremiah later imagines an angelic figure adorned with snowflakes, with an "ethereal ... foetus in her belly full-formed and glowing," but "[d]isengaging from the womb, the child tumble[s] seemingly forever, to a bed of broken beer bottles and screwdrivers filed sharp as nails" (144). The specific image of beer bottles and screwdrivers is a direct reference to the objects found inside of Evelyn Rose and Madeline. Looking through the lens of English scholars Lisa A. Dickson and Maryna Romanets, the continuation of angelic imagery could be an example of beauty being "instrumental in overcoming the aporia and crisis of representation [...] as the work of memory can be enriched by aesthetic pleasure, which can act as a survival tool for primary witnesses [of trauma]" (19). So, Jeremiah continuing to imagine Evelyn Rose/Madeline as angelic can help him cope with the pain.

Highway also uses humour to add an additional element of beauty and lightheartedness to the novel. Black-eyed Susan and her physically abusive husband, Happy Doll Magipom, are dubbed with these incredibly ironic nicknames. Black-eyed Susan refers to the name of a flower, but also alludes to the fact that this character likely receives black eyes at the hands of Happy Doll Magipom—someone whose anger problems clearly indicate that he is not very happy. These particular names juxtapose the people to whom they belong and are funny in their irony. Funny names are a recurrent motif in the novel. Though funny, Highway's nicknames are not always clearly explained. Little Seagull Ovary, for instance, is an old woman who is a midwife. The "Ovary" part connects to Little Seagull Ovary working closely with actual ovaries; although, what ovaries have to do with seagulls is a mystery. This element of mystery is also one demonstration of the Indigenous right to opacity. Opacity refers to "the perpetual, active refusal

of complete engagement: to speak with one's own in one's own way; to refuse translation and full explanations [for settlers]" (Garneau 21). Highway chooses not to provide an explanation of Little Seagull Ovary's name. One of the best examples of humour in the novel is young Jeremiah's lesson on evil. Father LaFleur is trying to instill the fear of God and the Devil, but Jeremiah can only focus on how wonderful all things evil seem to be. The scene acts as subversive mimicry, meaning it "encompasses the incorporation of Native-specific language, art forms and concepts and the reversal of the representation of the colonized as 'the Other'" (Thom 205). With Jeremiah as the protagonist who does not understand English or Roman Catholicism, the colonized is presented as an Other, while Jeremiah's Cree language and spirituality is the norm. For him, evil is but a pretty word, especially "the way the V [comes] to such an elegant point at the bottom, like a tiny, fleeting kiss" (Highway 62). Evil as a concept is lost in translation, and Father LaFleur's lesson is ironically having the opposite effect on Jeremiah. Hell seems like a fun place to be, and "King Lucy," as in Lucifer, the Devil, is a smiley man having a good time (61). The seriousness of these concepts relative to Roman Catholicism make Jeremiah's response particularly outrageous. His childhood naïveté and pure intentions make such a response lighthearted. Jeremiah is a child who is genuinely doing his best to listen and learn, but he is completely unaware of how much his interpretations would upset antagonist Father LaFleur, who usually gets his way. Highway does a good job of using humour to create beautiful little moments in moments of seriousness.

Throughout *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway manages to not only assert creative sovereignty, he also pushes back against colonial/settler norms. In writing the novel in shamelessly ornamented, Cree storytelling-style, Highway adds so many pieces of beauty to an otherwise sad story. His poetic prose sharpens his imagery and amplifies joy. Highway honours himself and his characters by choosing not to follow the standard or predictable narrative. His characters are joyful, thoughtful, funny, well-rounded peo-

ple who demonstrate that Indigenous characters can and should be written as much more than victims of colonial violence in Canada. Art like *Kiss of the Fur Queen* has the potential to change colonial-based attitudes and perspectives, and to change the way that Canada and Canadians view truth and reconciliation.

Works Cited

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