

Choreography, Sexuality, and the Indigenous Body in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

Rachid Belghiti
University of Montreal

Certainly, the struggles and complexities we live out as Aboriginal peoples implicated in multiworlds against a Western Eurocentric dominance is like a complex dance that requires constant attention to its choreography. There is this recognition, a 'knowing' that the usual equilibrium has been spun out of its centre and there is that constant struggling for balance for meaningful connections and wholeness. (Fitznor 53)

Tomson Highway's first novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, published in 1998, tells the story of two Cree brothers who develop their potential in music and dance from within the colonial violence that is inflicted sexually on their bodies. Being dedicated to the memory of the author's brother René, a dancer whose performance is a visual expression of survival, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* presents dance not only as a metaphor for de-centred Aboriginal lives in Canada, as Ella Fitznor notes in the epigraph of this article, but also as a site of embodiment in which indigenous and contemporary cultures fuse at the level of movement.¹ Although the novel's first epigraph illuminates the colonial project to suppress indigenous dance in the early twentieth century, Highway's narrative insists that dance is still nevertheless a practice that is culturally and spiritually meaningful among Aboriginal people in Canada. Highway states in an interview with Heather Hodgson that "dance is a metaphor for everything in our culture; for ritual, for art, for religion. Dance is a metaphor for being. If we cannot dance, we cannot pray" (Hodgson 2). Critics describe both the integrity of dance practices in Aboriginal cultures in Canada and the colonial stigmatisation and suppression of these practices.² However, dance in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* remains largely unexamined as a category of analysis through which the indigenous body emerges as an agent of meaning production from within colonial oppression.

Kiss of the Fur Queen opens with the visual description of Abraham Okimasis' vigour in winning the World Championship Dog Derby in

¹ For further reference to the imperative force of René Highway's dance and its location at the crossroad of cultures, see Citron, DiManno, and Trujillo.

² For further reading of the integrity of dance practices in indigenous culture and the Canadian government's recurrent attempts to outlaw these practices see Browner, Ellis, Pettipas, and Titley.

Eemanapiteepitat, northern Manitoba, in 1951. Nine months after Abraham wins the trophy and gets the kiss of the Fur Queen, his first son Champion is born “with the gift of making music” (*Kiss* 27). Three years later, the Okimasis family celebrates the birth of another son, Ooneemeetoo, who dances to his brother’s tunes. The European Catholic missionaries rename the two boys Jeremiah and Gabriel respectively and place them in the Residential School where priests abuse them physically and sexually.³ After they leave the Residential School, the two brothers move to Winnipeg where Jeremiah pursues his career as a concert pianist and Gabriel his career as a prominent dancer and choreographer. Because of his loneliness in Winnipeg, Jeremiah confines himself to classical music, leads an asexual ascetic life, and becomes culturally alienated. He only recovers from this alienation with the help of the magic figure of the Fur Queen at the end of the novel. By contrast, Gabriel explores his body’s homosexual desire both in restless dance performances and excessive sexual experiences. The two brothers’ different modes of life keep them apart for a long period until they reunite to perform the play *Ulysses Thunderchild* in which Jeremiah plays piano and Gabriel dances. The novel finishes with Gabriel’s death from AIDS and his spiritual movement “rising from his [dead] body floating off into the swirling mist” with the Fur Queen (306).

Kiss of the Fur Queen draws from Highway’s personal experience and his family background as it describes the indigenous body through both subjection and resistance to colonial violence. The character of Abraham Okimasis is inspired by Highway’s father Joe Highway who is a world champion dogsled racer. The story of the abuse of the Okimasis brothers is a fictional version of the actual colonial violence sexually staged on the bodies of Highway and his brother René in the Residential School during the 1950s. Moreover, Jeremiah’s and Gabriel’s development as musician and dancer respectively recalls the evolution of both Tomson Highway as a pianist and of René as a renowned dancer and choreographer who, like Gabriel in the novel, dies of AIDS. Although these autobiographical elements in the novel reflect the unhealed scar in Highway’s personal and collective memory, they still do not present the indigenous body entirely through colonial abuse and pain.⁴ This is because the indigenous body unfolds through the novel’s “complex engagement [...] that locates the personal experience within a specific colonial context, and that seeks to carry the force of that personal anguish back into the

³ The novel contests the abuse of indigenous children in the Canadian government-funded and Catholic church-run Residential Schools. For further reading of the relevance of the Residential School system in Highway’s novel, see Lane and McKegney.

⁴ Heather Hodgson writes that “Highway said that he may spend the rest of his writing life trying to sort out his anger at the Catholic church, the compulsory English language, and European cultural imperialism in general” (Hodgson 3).

public sphere to find appropriate forms of redress and progress” (Brydon 23).

This paper argues that the novel employs dance as a visually appropriate form of redress through which the indigenous body carries its colonial anguish and enacts its collective memory in the public sphere of contemporary Canada. In order to explore how the novel presents the overlap of contemporary and indigenous cultures in dance as a condition of survival, I first examine how the character of Gabriel evolves within the colonial, sexual, and cultural currents that cross his body and through which he, like René Highway, develops “a movement vocabulary that was contemporary although intrinsically Native in feeling” (Trujillo 22). I then argue that the narrative of de-centred Aboriginal lives in Canada unfolds through Gabriel’s de-centred choreography in which the indigenous “shadow zones of ancestors” (Favel Starr, “Waskawewin” 133) is part of what the contemporary dance theorist André Lepecki calls the “irretrievable, never fully translatable” meaning of dance (127). Finally, I examine how the novel presents the indigenous fancy dance of a pow wow event as unreadable and yet culturally and spiritually grounded. Here I contend that the novel intervenes in the contemporary debate around the elusiveness of dance while suggesting the existence of a native collective memory wherein such debate may take place. Thus, this article presents dance as a political counter-movement that ruptures the linear account of Canada’s historiography of exclusion and simultaneously choreographs, or inscribes through motion, a counter-narrative of its collective history still untold in the dominant archives of Canadian history. This project of reading history through dance in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* requires that I build a bridge between contemporary Western and indigenous dance philosophies in order to argue for the importance of choreography in the novel as an original narrative device where sexuality and subject formation intertwine in the indigenous history of oppression and survival.

Gabriel, whose Cree name means dancer, displays his dance talent early in life and achieves world fame from within the colonial violence that leads to his death at the end of the novel. Before Gabriel is born, his mother feels his body “jumping up and down” in her womb and his father predicts that “this one is gonna be a dancer” (30). Gabriel’s body is responsive to music at the age of four when he dances to his brother’s “little accordion” (41) tunes in their village of Eemanapiteepitat: “The moment Gabriel heard the music, his body began to glide across the bed of moss as though he were floating on a summer cloud” (42). Even in the dreadful space of the Residential School, Gabriel performs a dance in which he “beamed with pleasure [...] in a middle of a turn and tap-tippity-tap of the feet that required particular panache” (76). His subjection to the priest’s sexual abuse, immediately after his dance performance at school, hardly reduces his passion either for dance or the expression of his sexuality. This is unlike Jeremiah who becomes impotent, associating heterosexuality with the rape and murder of two indigenous girls, Rose

McCrae (107) and Madeline Jeanette Lavoix (132), in Winnipeg.⁵ In contrast, Gabriel explores his homoerotic desire in the promiscuity-filled spaces of “the Hell Hotel” (130) and “the Rose” bars (165), and trains hard to acquire classical ballet dance without ever forgetting “what they [i.e. colonial abusers] did to us” (120).

Gabriel’s body and sexuality evolve in the novel through the symbolic image of the trickster who, according to a Cree legend, survives the Weetigo’s violence only by way of carrying the effect of this violence on his body. The Okimasis brothers remember the story of the trickster and the Weetigo while walking in a down town mall in Winnipeg. According to the story, “Weesageechak [Cree trickster] comes down to earth disguised as a weasel” (118). He “crawls up the Weetigo’s bum hole [then] chewed the Weetigo’s entrails to smithereens from the inside out” (120). The weasel frees himself from the Weetigo but realises that his coat is “covered with shit . . . God dipped him in the river to clean his coat. But he held him by the tail, so its tip stayed dirty” (121). The Weetigo is a monstrous figure which features prominently in the narrative and is associated with European colonialism and capitalist mass consumerism. The Weetigo represents such spaces as bars (105), malls (116), and television (187), which symbolically devour indigenous people and turn them into beast-like figures full of desire for food, sex, fashion, and images. Most importantly, the novel describes Father LaFleur’s sexual abuse in terms of the Weetigo’s violence that infects the bodies it devours and intensifies their desire for other bodies. Jeremiah, who witnesses the scene of his brother being raped, imagines the abusive priest as “a dark, hulking figure hovered over him [i.e. Gabriel] like a crow. Visible only in Silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honeycomb, or the Weetigo feasting on human flesh” (79). Yet, rather than diminishing at the hands of the priest, Gabriel’s desire intensifies as “the pleasure in his centre welled so deep that he was about to open his mouth and swallow whole the living flesh” (78). Gabriel’s body frees itself from the priest’s violence and develops its homoerotic desire only by carrying the trace of the priest’s abuse, just like the trickster who frees himself from the Weetigo’s violence only by way of subjection to this violence. In this sense, the story of the weasel and the Weetigo symbolically clarifies how the priest’s violence on Gabriel’s body produces a positive result as this violence is re-visioned by Gabriel into a source of his corporeal potential in sexuality and dance.

The symbolic dimension of Gabriel’s body and sexuality unfolds differently during his first sexual encounter with his dance mentor and

⁵ These events portray the social injustice that native women suffer in Canada and relate more specifically to Highway’s memory of Helen Betty Osborne, a native woman who attended high school with Highway and who was raped and murdered in the Pas Manitoba in 1971. For Highway’s personal memory of this event, see Tompkins and Male. For a sociological analysis of the gendered and racially perpetrated colonial violence in urban Canada, see Razak.

lover Gregory Newman. When Gabriel first notices Gregory training some dancers in The Royal Winnipeg Ballet School, he wonders “who was this man [...] the voice of honey, the will of iron?” (198). After everybody has left, and “the room was as silent as a chapel” (200), Gabriel tries to figure out how “he could get his groin to open further without ripping” (200). At that moment Gregory, “unencumbered of coat and brief case” (200), suddenly emerges, interrupts Gabriel’s movement, nudges his body, and asks him “to think of your pelvis ... as a plate with an offering” (200), which gives Gabriel an ecstatic sensation as he “feels himself devoured” by Gregory (200). At a superficial level, Gregory’s suggestion means that Gabriel’s pelvis should “open” for an accurate ballet movement. Yet on a more symbolic level, Gregory’s request implies that Gabriel’s body is the body of Christ, which is offered as a sacrifice. In fact, the images of the gym barre which Gabriel “suspected was a communion rail in a vengeful second coming” (200) and the room which is “as silent as a chapel” foreshadow the religious context of sacrifice implied in Gregory’s request to Gabriel. These images also recall Gabriel’s role of Jesus receiving the lashings at the hands of priest Lafleur, which he plays in a school performance earlier in the novel (85). Thus, Gregory’s role in Gabriel’s life is revealing since it reminds Gabriel of the position he assumes for himself as a redeemer of his people, as he does in the school performance.

Critics have unravelled the complexity of Gabriel’s sexuality during his first sexual encounter with Gregory. In her article about the indigenous body and language in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Susan Knabe points out this complexity when she argues that “Gabriel’s sexuality is presented as complex and enigmatic, it is both the requirement of the physical discipline of dance, his pelvis must open in order to perform the move correctly, and a remnant of the ritual of religion, an offering, which marks his body as available” (139). Marjory Fee also notices that Gregory Newman is the “priest-like dance mentor and partner [of Gabriel who] links his [i.e. Gabriel’s] dance with the offering up of Christ’s body at the mass” (55). Fee implies that Gregory’s request invites us to consider Gabriel’s dance less as a recreational diversion than as a space of embodiment in which the body thrusts itself forwards in a symbolically charged movement. Coral Ann Howells equally refers to the idea of sacrifice that Gabriel’s body and sexuality evoke in the novel. Howells comments that Gabriel is “locked into the role of sacrificial sexual victim [and that his] body is both gift and sacrifice” (89). Indeed, the above mentioned idea of Gabriel’s “vengeful second coming” (*Kiss* 200) relates to the fact that sex for Gabriel is an act of vengeance, since he frequently betrays his dance mentor and partner, more particularly with priests. Still, Gabriel’s body, as Howells argues, is not only Gabriel’s sacrifice but also his gift which unfolds through his dance as colonial, mythical, collective, and sexual layers are woven together in the thick texture of his movement.

Gabriel’s physical dance dramatises theatrically the indigenous metaphorical “complex dance” in which indigenous collective memory choreographically cuts across the self-integrity of Canada’s contemporary

space. While dancing before a “thousand white faces” (236) that include Gregory, Gabriel simultaneously dreams of his dead father coming out of his grave to tell his sons the story of the Son of Ayash:

“Ayash oogoosisa,” the hunter rasped at them, “the greatest Cree hero knew no fear, he ...” And the wind took the words. A note rang out, high pitched, sustained. And from his father’s corpse, slowly Gabriel Okimasis raised his naked torso, strings crashed, electric, twanging, catapulting the dancer on a trajectory beyond the grave, the village, the earth. In the theatre’s last row, among the thousand white faces, Gregory Newman sat slumped [...] kept thinking about this luminous man on stage who had learned to climb air as a spider climbs webs [...] he [i.e. Gregory] had failed to plumb something essential. (236, 237)

The movement of Gabriel’s torso in and out of his father’s corpse suggests that Gabriel’s body crosses the common boundaries between the individual and the collective, the contemporary and the mythical, and the corporeal and the spiritual through his poowamoowin, or “act of dreaming” (245). Gabriel’s elasticity in dance, his movement around and “beyond the grave, the village, the earth,” choreographs his metaphorical “complex dance” between the collective memory that inhabits his body and the contemporary theatre stage that evokes metonymically today’s white-dominated Canada. This choreographic oscillation in Gabriel’s dance deconstructs the dichotomous binarism between the above two spaces as privileged centre and subordinated periphery, and consequently suggests that “memory alone retains the spatial pattern, the design of the choreography” (Brandstetter 106).

The elements of memory and dream which permeate Gabriel’s dance are keystones in indigenous theories of choreography. The Plains Cree choreographer, actor and theatre director Floyd Favel Starr informs us that “our task [contemporary indigenous dancers] is to remember and to work from our origins [...] remembering songs, developing a body flexible and free enough to learn intricate movements of dances, and nurturing memory to learn and absorb [...] stories” (24). Being contemporaneous with Favel Starr’s theories of choreography, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* visually describes the ways in which Gabriel’s intricate movement absorbs the stories as his body thrusts itself forward in the space of memory of the Son of Ayash story that his father tells his sons at his deathbed. The Cree collective memory of the Son of Ayash cuts across Gabriel’s ballet performance and makes his choreography, or bodily motion in space, so transgressive that Gregory Newman fails to come to terms with it. Gabriel’s movement illustrates the indigenous dancer’s process of “adapting what is new [...] and always working and connecting with our tradition [which] continues to be our source of power and will make our work identifiable from other people’s work” (“A Plains Nomad” 24). Gabriel’s dance indeed integrates the collective memory of ancestors in its choreography and consequently becomes, in Favel Starr’s words, “identifiable from” the current ballet movement which Gregory Newman instructs. The novel actually clarifies that contemporary indigenous ballet movement is less an entertaining

sport than an empowering space through which the dancer, like the mythical figure of the Son of Ayash he remembers, seeks to expel the Weetigo which Cree mythology associates with colonial violence. In this sense, although Gabriel's dance does not resolve his entrapment in the Weetigo-filled colonial world, it nevertheless enables his body to connect with the healing potential of dream in movement.

Dream and memory are also central to the dance performances of René Highway, to whose memory the novel is dedicated. The Native American dancer, actor, and choreographer Raoul Trujillo describes René Highway as "a living artist consumed by his work and his emotions [...]" There was no differentiation between the dream world and the waking world [for René]. Both were very real and equally as important, although it was easier for him to dream" (22). By "dream," Trujillo means the way in which René remembers his ancestors through the space of his dance and connects with them through movement. Trujillo adds that René's collective "memory fuelled the creative process [...] in the retelling of stories [...] Memory is an elevated state of being and remembering is the action [...] dreaming is one way of developing the technique of remembering" (22). Trujillo's words about René mesh well with Favel's above-mentioned conception of Movement, which is reflected in Gabriel's performance in the novel. Gabriel, who is as consumed by his work as René, performs a dance that displays how the dream world and the waking world are deeply intertwined in movement, and how the indigenous conception of art is integral to life, rather than being seen as an imitation of it as is common in Western culture. In this regard, the novel invites us to read Gabriel's dance through René's—not only because the two men live a passionate life, die in the prime of their lives, and refuse to be mourned after their deaths, but because Tomson Highway's creation of Gabriel's character confirms the transformative force of dance movement that René's performances embody in reality.⁶ Thus René's "ghost [...]" whose shadowy image dances on the front cover of the book, superimposed on a snowfield and a clouded winter sky" (Pearson 173), returns to claim that "the [indigenous] dead are not powerless" as the Chief Seattle of the Squamish says in the second epigraph of the novel.

Nonetheless, although it retains collective memory as a central frame of reference, Gabriel's choreography in the above-described performance hardly promises any central meaning for its viewer's gaze. As it choreographs the complex blending of various temporalities, Gabriel's motion disrupts Gregory Newman's Western-oriented cartography and delays its promise for any "essential" meaning. For despite his *savoir faire* to "manipulate [his dancers'] limbs, mould their torsos, and control their breath" (*Kiss* 198), Gregory "fails to plumb something essential" about

⁶ Before he dies, Gabriel asks his brother Jeremiah to be joyful and not mourn him (300). Tomson Highway recalls that his brother René made the same request to him before he died in 1990. For a reference to Highway's indication of this point, see Methot.

Gabriel's dancing body. At this point, Gabriel's dance emerges as a critical field of knowledge that informs us about the ways Cree collective memory intervenes in contemporary ballet in Canada and subverts its choreographic parameters. This permutation is crucial in two ways. First, it illustrates how the indigenous body negotiates the contemporary conception of the elusiveness of dance from the perspective of a Cree concept of collective memory that remains untranslatable in Eurocentric terms. In this case, the novel actually reminds us that we cannot distance today's debate on the illusiveness of contemporary dance from the communal histories that permeate this dance. Secondly, the permutation of the collective memory in Gabriel's ballet dance is also crucial because it actually choreographs the spectral return of this memory in movement in order to haunt the national, racial, and cultural integrity of the "thousand white faces" sitting and watching Gabriel's performance. Gregory also proves unable to read Gabriel's dancing body because he reduces this body to an irresistible object of his desiring gaze. Gregory thus wonders: "why did Gabriel keep stashed [...] in those *secretive* corners, behind those eyes whose *dark* little lashes [...] were nothing but headache and fatigue? [...] why did he *disappear* from time to time?" (237, my emphasis). Gregory's questions evoke the settler-invader's unfulfilled desire to possess the indigenous body sexually and discipline it choreographically. Gregory's questions overlap with his sexual possession that clearly unfolds later in the novel as an oppressive force, denying Gabriel's body any sense of sexual agency. In a climactic outburst, "Gregory's voice bled through: 'Where did you go after the preview last night? Come on Gabriel. Production meetings don't go to 3:00 A.M [...] How many people come by the house whenever I am out for even half an hour? Do you think I have no nose? That smell bed-sheets, sweat?'" (275). Gregory's skill to manage bodies choreographically appears to grant him the right to control Gabriel's body not only kinaesthetically but also socio-sexually in order to own this body as his private space. In this sense, while ballet dance in the novel liberates Gabriel and speaks "to him in a way nothing else had ever done" (153) it also, as Susan Knabe notes, reinscribes him, however incompletely, as the object of a desiring, devouring, disciplinary, colonising white male gaze" (139).

In this regard, the novel presents Gabriel's choreography and sexuality as intertwined sites of embodied colonial power through which Gregory seeks to reduce Gabriel's indigenous body to a docile object of Gregory's colonial desire. I read Gregory's queer sexual relationship with Gabriel in terms of colonial desire because Gregory's above described attempt to regulate Gabriel's sexuality cannot, in my view, be abstracted from the colonial history which legitimizes this regulation and normalizes it. The physical images that Gregory uses to describe Gabriel—"stashed . . . in those secretive corners, . . . eyes [with] dark little flashes"—recall the Eurocentric repertory of mystifying images which exoticise the indigenous subject as the secretive Other whom the settler expels but still longs to explore sexually and, in the case of Gregory, manage

choreographically. Being located in these asymmetrical relations of power, Gabriel's body is accordingly the body of "the expelled [indigenous] Other [who] returns as the object of [...] longing and fascination [...] 'the savage' [...] placed at the outer limit of [Canada's] civil life, [who suddenly] becomes [the] symbolic content of [Gregory's] desire" (Stallybrass and White 45). In this sense, Gregory, as Knabe and Fee both imply, continues rather than ruptures Father LaFleur's violence whose destructive effect the novel revisions through Gabriel's kinaesthetic potential in dance.

Indeed, instead of constituting itself entirely through its subjection to Gregory's anxious desire, Gabriel's choreography unfolds in a transgressive and a politically evasive dance where his body rewrites history from the counter-discursive potential of movement. In one of his adroit stage performances:

Gabriel Okimasis beamed like a torch. He was walking on air, his toes tingling, his heart atwitter, for never had he expected to be a star with lights and tights and wigs and music and choreography. Instinctively, he knew that he was doing something revolutionary, perhaps historical definitely head turning. (Kiss 155)

Gabriel's choreography is "historical definitely head turning" because it unsettles mainstream constructions of native subjectivity in terms of "worthlessness, laziness, dependence, and lack of 'higher' order human qualities" (Smith 4). Although the image of a "beaming torch," much like other descriptions of Gabriel as "fine linen" (166) with "sultry beauty and desirability" (167), both glorifies and over-eroticises Gabriel's body, it hardly romanticizes this body in a totalising linear narrative of purity. For, as I have previously noted, Gabriel's body is also a promiscuous body stereotypically associated with indigenous bodies in Canada. Indeed, Gabriel's bodily movement is "revolutionary" because it demonstrates that colonial violence, which Father LaFleur performs in the Residential School, produces a body whose dance motion choreographs a counter-narrative of collective history from within colonial pain. Being haunted by LaFleur's abuse, or "what they have done to us" (120), Gabriel walks "on air, his toes tingling, his heart atwitter" so as to assert visually that colonial violence can be re-visioned by his dance into a source of constructive corporeal potential. To Susan Leigh Foster, Gabriel's choreography is "a critical historicizing, a thinking tool, to rethink how ethnography, historiography [in Canada] is subjected to choreographic revision" (xi). *Kiss of the Fur Queen* presents the above moment of dance as a "thinking tool" through which we reflect about the construction of a narrative of indigenous history and identity from the perspective of movement. This dance is also politically urgent because it presents the body as "a socio-political agent [that] manifests its agency through the many ways it eventually struggles its materiality into a charged presence that defies subjection" (Lepecki 6). Because "he knew . . . [what] he was doing," Gabriel actually claims agency and "defies subjection" as his dance visually unlearns historical and social constructions from within

rampant colonial abuse. Gabriel's dancing body "struggles [...] [through its historical] materiality" and physicality into a charged presence as it re-establishes the social and political dynamic of indigenous subject formation in Canada.

Furthermore, Gabriel's choreography becomes a politically subversive mode of redressing what Sam McKegney calls Canada's "legacy discourse" (84). McKegney notes that this discourse of the state and the church "situated Aboriginal people [...] as the primary objects of study rather than the system of acculturative violence [of the Residential School system] itself" (84, 85). Although McKegney adds that the novel's "political effectiveness [...] resides in its re-imagining of current legacy discourse [...] and articulating alternative patterns of redress and empowerment" (85), he does not depict how the novel choreographs this reimagining in dance. Nor does he evoke how the dancing body emerges as a signifying agent of empowerment and redress. I would argue that Highway's narrative employs "the political potential of the choreographic" as the "alternative pattern of empowerment" that unsettles Canada's "legacy discourse" and problematises it from the perspective of corporeality (Browning 163). In this regard, "the political effectiveness" of the novel lies in its employment of choreography as a new "way of knowing" (Acoose 37) that both rethinks Canada's "legacy discourse" and suggests the dancing body as a tool of analysis deeply embedded in "our [indigenous] cultural epistemologies and pedagogies" (56).

The novel also disrupts Canada's "legacy discourse" through its own narrative discourse that blends the performative and the literary modes in a "complex dance"—like narrative design. The above-described bodily writing / inscription of Gabriel's movements represents the performative mode that perpetually crosses the verbal mode of the narrative and consequently deconstructs the conventional binarism between the two. The narrative itself, like Gabriel's dance, is a blend of the contemporary and the indigenous so as to unlearn Canada's "legacy discourse" that describes indigenous subjects as sick and traumatised enough to be in need of the State's compensation. I read the fusion of the textual and the performative on the one hand and the contemporary and the indigenous on the other as part of the novel's process of choreographing "the complex dance" and showing how indigenous subject construction takes place along the complexity of this dance. In this sense, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* presents choreography as "a way of thinking about the relationship of aesthetics to politics [...] as a performative, choreography cannot be simply identified with the aesthetic and set in opposition to the category of 'the political'" (Hewitt 11). By virtue of its counter-discursive *élan* that unsettles the above-mentioned sexual, social, and racial power relationships in the novel, choreography dismantles the opposition between the aesthetic and the political as they overlap through the interrogative legacy of dance.

Dance also unfolds in the novel through the pow wow event which Jeremiah and Gabriel attend in Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Both the

excessively bright colours of the dancers' regalia and their energetic movements frighten Jeremiah and astonish Gabriel. This is because the Okimasis brothers, like Highway, are northern Cree who are not affiliated with a pow wow culture and whose ancestors were Christianised long ago in the fur trade times.⁷ Thus, despite his skill in dance, Gabriel realises that he is unable to explain this dance in which:

A dozen bronze youths throb by. Their backs sprouted feather-rimmed suns—black on yellow, red on black, pink, blue, purple, orange—two per fancy dance, one above the other. A gust of wind ruffled the suns, shimmering domino effect that fell against the wall of Gabriel's heart, sparking the image of the spiked, roiling spine of the mythic lake serpent, the Son of Ayash riding it to the Island of the flesh devourers. (*Kiss* 243)

Not only does this event in the novel illustrate contemporary fancy dance, it also dramatises the indigenous body's dynamism in movement that informs remarkably this body's survival and resistance to colonial violence.⁸ The movements of throbbing and sprouting constitute a choreography that is integral to an indigenous cultural dynamic in which the body is both a medium and a signifying agent articulating its own imaginative rebuttal and enacting its communal connectivity through motion. Instead of being frozen in a romanticizing rhetoric of lament of the colonial pain that is inflicted on them, the indigenous dancers in this fancy dance are connected as a community of bodies partaking in a common effort to narrate their physical ability to endure—that is, continuing to exist through pain.⁹ Dance, in this case, is a process of healing disjunctures as it helps the dancers to exorcise the colonial violence that “devours” them. In fact, the strength and vigour of the dancers reminds Gabriel of the Son of Ayash who “took the weapons and, on a magic water snake journeyed” to free the human soul from the violence of the Weetigo, the flesh devourer (227). Gabriel's memory of “the lake serpent [and] the Son of Ayash” thus illustrates that the above dance is a moment in which the indigenous body moves and throbs to exorcise the demon of the Weetigo. That is why Gabriel realises that “he had to learn this dance. Someday soon, he may need it” (243), since he feels the healing and transformative potential that is inherent in it.

Nevertheless, although Gabriel does not feel as distant spiritually from the pow wow event as Jeremiah, he is still unable to interpret the fancy dance and the rituals that take place at the event. While Jeremiah feels ‘like a German tourist’ (242), Gabriel admits that “there was no rules

⁷ For the process of the Christianisation mission of Cree indigenous people in Canada, see Calvin.

⁸ For the description of indigenous fancy dance in Canada, the forms it takes among male and female dancers, and the way it develops from traditional to contemporary styles, see Browner.

⁹ For a discussion of the role of dance in the development of indigenous community life and kinship, see Ellis and Valaskasis.

to this Round Dance that he could recognise” (244). Both brothers are curious to see some communal practices in which:

an old man passing [...] raised an eagle plume, a woman did likewise. The crowd shaded eyes to look up at a peerless sky. Half a mile above the field, migisso—the eagle—flew lazy circles. For the song, apparently, had summoned migisso—the messenger of God, according to those praying—and she had heard. (244)

Here, the novel evokes some of the indigenous cultural practices that remain immune to the Western process of Christianisation to which Cree communities have been subjected since the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Besides, by presenting dance through the above described cultural practices, the novel opens up the possibility of reconceptualising the postmodern notion of the untranslatability of dance from the vantage point of an indigenous epistemology that is both homogenizing and disruptive as it remains unreadable in the novel. The circularity of fancy dance evokes both the homogenising force of what the contemporary indigenous scholar Gail Guthrie Valaskakis calls “the circle of socialization” (151) and the untranslatability that contemporary theories attribute to dance.¹¹ The choreography of this dance therefore theatrically manifests a moment when, to use the words of the contemporary theorist Peggy Phelan, “the moving body [...] is fading from our eyes to make us constantly uncertain of its boundaries [...] as we witness this fading in which we do and do not see these bodies” (205). Nonetheless, rather than being located outside of history, this ghostly zone of seeing and not seeing draws from the indigenous poowamoo-win, or “act of dreaming” that is central to the survival of native mythology and indigenous cultural history and memory.

Seen through Floyd Favel Starr’s indigenous perspective on choreography, the fancy dance in the novel’s pow wow event emanates from the collective memory and its evasion of totalising interpretations. Favel Starr argues that “the relationship of the feet to the ground, the head to the sky, the different position in the body [...] are] enigmatic relationships [...] that creates the dance. These enigmatic relationships are the shadow zones where ancestors and the unknown dwell, and this is where the creativity is born, where the impulse is born” (114). Rather than implying the disempowering trope of secrecy that colonial discourse associates with indigenous cultural practices, “the unknown” in Favel Starr’s indigenous choreographic terms is the unreadable space of disruption that evades the colonial desire to acquire this body as a static

¹⁰ For the meaning of the Eagle’s feathers and animals in Aboriginal mode of knowledge, see Browner and Ellis.

¹¹ Prominent contemporary Western dance theorists, like Foster, Lepecki, Martin, Phelan, Browning, and Mackendrick define dance as a space where the body transgresses the control of power through movement. Lepecki and MacKendrick, most particularly, draw from Jacques Derrida’s method of deconstruction to explain how meaning in dance vanishes constantly in bodily movement, in the same way the linguistic signified—or meaning—according to Derrida, defers through the play of signifiers.

ethnographic object. This unreadable zone is also a collective site where “the dancers [in the novel] release contained spirits or forces back into the deep caves of mother earth, where they would be immune from the coloniser’s strategies and techniques” (Youngblood Henderson 61). Through this act of releasing the contained spirits so they can return to the mother earth, the dancing indigenous body actively plunges itself into its collective memory of its ancestors, whose bones and blood are themselves the soil on which the dancer’s body taps as it dances. Indeed, Gabriel’s above-mentioned choreography recovers its collective communion in which his body re-members the bodies of the dead through its virtuosity that is deeply “layered in the ambiguity and continuity of tribal memories” (Valaskis 155).

All in all, the indigenous body in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* unfolds through the complexity of the layered discourses of race and sexuality that inscribe it as a site of representation and control.¹² The indigenous body in the novel also emerges through the intersecting axes of the colonial violence that abuses it and the collective cultural memory that invades its dance movement. The novel, as I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, not only metaphorically choreographs “the complex dance” of Aboriginals between various cultures, as Fitznor argues, but also addresses dance movement as a theatrical space where indigenous and contemporary cultures blend choreographically. Nevertheless, rather than vanishing in the process of this cultural blending, Gabriel’s collective memory assumes a disruptive force as it interrupts the self-integrity and autonomy of his ballet choreography and deconstructs kinaesthetically the Eurocentric binary opposition between white dominant Self and the indigenous Other. This kinaesthetic disruption also informs us as to how dance in the novel initiates the process of rewriting history from the perspective of an Aboriginal cultural archive which the acculturative power of the Residential School seeks to obliterate. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* thus suggests dance as way to unpack the revitalizing force of indigenous art for cultural survival. The novel, most importantly, offers us the possibility of thinking of this force in terms of its potential to intervene in both contemporary dance and postmodern theories of the evanescence of meaning in dance. Both Gabriel’s ballet and the fancy dance in the Manitoulin pow wows invite, as I have tried to argue, a re-conceptualisation of the postmodern theory of elusiveness in dance through indigenous paradigms that remain untranslatable in Western narratives of knowledge. The novel thus bridges the gap between indigenous and contemporary theories of dance without undermining the colonial dynamic that problematises the connection between the two. The novel rather illustrates this dynamic through the

¹² Although this article is not concerned with gender, as much as it is with sexuality, the category of gender is also pivotal in the novel since it inscribes the indigenous body as a site of colonial control and representation. For further reading about gender in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, see Tompkins and Male and Wigston.

sexual and choreographic encounter between Gabriel and his ballet mentor and lover Gregory Newman. This relationship revolves around the colonial history that conditions it and the institutional power of choreographic knowledge that regulates it. Therefore, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* informs us that sexuality and choreography are crucial categories of analysis through which the indigenous body's desire and movement unfolds as a space of both meaning construction and redress from within the settler-invader's immanent violence.

Works Cited

- Acoose, Janice. "The Vanishing Indian?" (*Ad*)*ressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures*. Ed. Armand Garnet Ruffo. Penticton: Theytus Books, 2001. 37-56.
- Brandstetter, Gabriele. "Choreography as Cenotaph: The Memory of Movement." In *ReMembering the Body: Body and Movement in the 20th Century*. Ed. Gabriele Brandstetter and Hortensia Völckers. Trans. Andrea Scrima and Rainer Emig. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000. 104-11.
- Browner, Tara. *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-wow*. Urbana: Illinois UP, 2002.
- Browning, Barbara. "Choreographing Postcoloniality: Reflections on the Passing of Edward Said." *Dance Research Journal* 35.2 (Winter 2004): 164-9.
- Brydon, Diana. "Compromising Postcolonialisms: Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Contemporary Postcolonial Debates." *Compr(om)ising Post/colonialism(s): Challenging Narratives and Practices*. Ed. Greg Ratcliffe and Gerry Turcotte. Sydney: Dangaroo, 2001. 15-29.
- Calvin, Martin. *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade*. Berkeley: California UP, 1978.
- Citron, Paula. "Obituary: René Highway, 36: Charismatic Performer." *The Toronto Star*. Saturday October 20, 1990. A4.
- DiManno, Rosie. "René Dances to Brother Tune in Cree Tale." *The Toronto Star*. Friday March 18, 1998. 1.
- Ellis, Clyde. *A Dancing People: Pow wow Culture of the Southern Plains*. Lawrence: Kansas UP, 2003.
- Favel Starr, Floyd. "Waskawewin." *Topoi* 24.1 (2005): 113-15.
- . "A Plains Nomad-Over the Ocean" *Canadian Theatre Review* 68 (Fall 1991): 24-25.
- Fee, Margery. "Perfect Cree." *Canadian Literature* 176 (Spring 2003): 156-57.
- Fitznor, Laara. "The Power of Indigenous Knowledge and Identity and Colonization in Canada." *Indigenous People's Wisdom and Power: Affirming Our Knowledge through Narratives*. Ed. Julian E. Kunie and Nomalungelo I. Goduka. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. 51-77.

- Foster, Susan Leigh. "Choreographing History." *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*. Ed. Alexandra Carter. London: Routledge, 1998. 180-92.
- . "Introduction." *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture, and Power*. Ed. Susan Leigh Foster. London: Routledge, 1996. xi-xvi.
- Hewitt, Andrew. *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- Highway, Tomson. *The Rez Sisters*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1988.
- . *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1989.
- . "Tomson Highway: Native Voice." Dir. Robert Sherrin. Adrienne Clarkson Presents. Videotape. CBC, 1990.
- . *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1998.
- Hodgson, Heather. "Survival Cree, or Weesakeechak Dances down Yonge Street: Heather Hodgson Speaks with Tomson Highway." *Books in Canada* 28.1(1999): 2-5.
- Howells, Coral Ann. "Tomson Highway: *Kiss of the Fur Queen*" *Where Are the Voices Coming from? Canadian Culture and the Legacies of History*. Ed. Coral Ann Howells. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004. 83-92.
- Knabe, Susan. "Corporeal Resistance/ Corporeal Reconciliation: Body and Language in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*." *Connections: Non-Native Responses to Native Canadian Literature (In Memory of Dr. Howard Adams)*. Ed. Hartmuth Lutz and Coomie S. Vevaina. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2003. 129-49.
- Lane, Richard, J. "Surviving the Residential School System: Resisting Hegemonic Canadianness in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*." *Reconfigurations: Canadian Literatures and Postcolonial Identities/Littératures Canadiennes et Identités Postcoloniales*. Ed and Intr. Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi, Brussels: Peter Lang, 2002. 191-201.
- Lepecki, André, "Introduction: Presence and the Body in Dance and Performance Theory." *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*. Ed. André Lepecki. Middletown, CN: Wesleyan UP, 2004. 1-9.
- Martin, Randy. *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.
- McKegney, Sam. "From Trickster Poetics to Transgressive Politics: Substantiating Survivance in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 17.4 (2005): 79-113.
- McKendrick, Karmen. "Embodying Transgression." *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays On Dance and Performance Theory*. Ed. André Lepecki. CN: Wesleyan UP, 2004. 140-56.
- Methot, Suzanne. "The Universe of Thomson Highway." *Quill & Quire* 64.11 (November 1998): 1.
- Milloy, John S. *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986*. Winnipeg: Manitoba UP, 1999.

- Pearson, Wendy. "How Queer Native Narratives Interrogate Colonial Discourses." *Economies of Representation, 1790-2000: Colonialism and Commerce*. Ed. Leigh Dale and Helen Gilbert. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. 169-81.
- Pettipas, Katherine. *Severing the Ties That Bind: Government Repression of Indigenous Religious Ceremonies on the Prairies*. Winnipeg: Manitoba UP, 1994.
- Phelan, Peggy. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Choreographing Writing." *Choreographing History*. Ed. Susan Leigh Foster. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. 200-10.
- Preston, Jennifer. "Weesageechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Arts Inc." *TDR / The Drama Review* 36 (Spring 1992): 135-59.
- Razack, Sherene H. "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George." *Race, Space and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*. Ed. Sherene H. Razack. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002. 121-56.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*. New York: Zed Books, 1999.
- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986.
- Titley, E. Brian. *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada*. Vancouver: British Columbia UP, 1986.
- Tompkins, Johanne and Lisa Male. "Twenty-one Native Women on Motorcycles: An Interview with Tomson Highway." *Australasian Drama Studies* 24 (April 1994): 13-28.
- Trujillo, Raoul. "Memory and Remembering." *Canadian Theatre Review* 68 (Fall 1991): 22.
- Valaskasis, Gail Guthrie. *Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005.
- Wasserman, Jerry. "'God of the Whiteman! God of the Indian! God Al-Fucking-Mighty!': The Residential School Legacy in Two Canadian Plays." *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'Etudes Canadiennes* 39.1 (Winter 2005): 23-48.
- Wigston, Nancy. "Nanabush in the City." *Books in Canada* 18.2 (March 1989): 7-9.
- Youngblood Henderson, James (Sákéj). "Postcolonial Ghost Dancing: Diagnosing European Colonialism." *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Ed. Marie Battiste. Vancouver: British Columbia UP, 2000. 57-76.

