

# Productive Dissonance: Classical Music in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

SARAH WYLIE KROTZ

Indigenous literatures will resist the boundaries and boxes. In reality, more of our varied voices will be raised in art, literature and music and the definitions of who we are will be forced to change. Our different voices will create a new harmony.

— Kateri Damm, "Says Who" 24

IN HIS SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), Tomson Highway casts an unflinching gaze on a country whose colonial wounds have not yet healed. The novel follows two Cree brothers, Champion/Jeremiah and Ooneemeetoo (Dancer)/Gabriel Okimasis, from birth to adulthood as they negotiate the often antithetical worlds of their Northern Manitoba Reserve, Catholic Residential School, and the tough urban landscapes of Winnipeg and Toronto. Profound rifts separate generations, communities, cultures, and even languages in postcolonial Canada<sup>1</sup> — “a chasm as unbridgeable as hell,” Highway writes, “separates Cree from English” (190). For all its discord, however, this fractured world contains startling beauty as well as pain, violence, and sorrow. Invoking the tantalizing possibility of transcending its chasms, music swells and reverberates through the novel. A cacophony of Cree folk songs, Christian hymns, Broadway show tunes, country music, and Powwow drum beats make up a heterogeneous musical backdrop, but the European classical tradition holds a prominent place in the book. Recalling Highway’s own training in classical piano, his protagonist, Jeremiah, proves to be a gifted pianist. Classical music is also vital to the novel’s form: Italian markers of musical tempo organize *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as if it were itself a classical composition — in Highway’s words, “a sonata, to which [Jeremiah’s] younger brother [Gabriel] dances”<sup>2</sup> (qtd. in Hodgson 3).

The centrality of classical music both structurally and thematically in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* has provoked questions but, to date, little sustained critical discussion. Sherrill E. Grace finds its presence “enigmatic,” its unique language “surprising in this otherwise Cree-English text” (297, n30). The Italian tempo directions that introduce each of the book’s six sections seem paradoxically to privilege the culture of the colonizers even as the rest of the novel “writ[es] back” to Eurocentric practices and ideals (259). As Heather Hodgson observes, “There is something incongruous between Highway’s choice of that quintessentially European genre and his apparent aversion to that culture. Yet it is the sonata and the novel forms that offer him the structural complexities required to organize this book” (4). Taking these critics’ perplexity as its point of departure, this essay seeks to “come . . . to terms” with what the language of classical music is “doing there” (Grace 297, n30).

That Highway has continued to draw on the classical tradition, subtitling his last play “a ‘string quartet,’” and recently writing the libretto for the “first Cree opera” (Morrow), attests to his enduring interest in music, both as an expression of colonial relationships and as a possible means of transforming them. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* remains his most penetrating exploration of the European medium and its appropriation and hybridization by a Cree artist. Jeremiah’s shifting relationship to classical piano provides an index of the challenges of transculturation. His rejection and ultimate reconfiguration of the art form emphasize the ways in which music is embedded in the oppressive framework of empire and its divisive hierarchies. However, music manifests a plurality of meanings in the novel, the interplay of which captures the tensions of Jeremiah’s (and arguably also Highway’s) postcolonial existence. Music embodies a capacity to unite as well as divide, to liberate as well as oppress, to create as well as destroy, to transcend barriers as well as erect them — often all at the same time. The language of classical music that structures this text can be read, then, not just as a vestige or reminder of colonial domination, but as a means of complicating the facile binary according to which “Native = good, non-Native = bad” (Shackleton 46). In other words, through classical music, Highway deconstructs the opposed categories that confine cultures and pit languages against one another in the contact zone.<sup>3</sup> This process is, in the end, about dwelling within the chasms between cultures rather than bridging them, however; accordingly, music creates not harmony so much as a productive

dissonance from the violent clash of worlds through which Highway's characters move.

### I. Music and the Problem of Translation

Throughout the novel, Highway continually points to the limits of language. Young Gabriel's recitation of the rosary, for instance, becomes an occasion for humorous mistranslation: "Hello merry, mutter of cod, play for ussinees, now anat tee ower of ower beth, aw, men.' . . . his knees hurting from the cold, hard linoleum, he couldn't help but wonder why the prayer included the Cree word 'ussinees.' What need did this mutter of cod have of a pebble?" (71). If this scene is meant to be funny, the issue it highlights is a serious one. In *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* J. Edward Chamberlin succinctly articulates a problem of which Highway is all too aware: "language is a perennial contradiction. It is supposed to nourish communication, and yet often it does just the opposite. It is supposed to sustain communities, but often it breaks them apart" (113). Imperialism, one of the "main features" of which "is control over language" (Ashcroft et al. 7), exacerbates the territorial implications of verbal expression. The fact that the Okimasis brothers are each given two names — one, Cree, at birth, and another, Biblical, at their christening — is evocative of the divisions between the languages and traditions that play tug-of-war with their identities. As Suzanne Methot has noted, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* bears the scars of Highway's "uneasy relationship with the English language, which was forced upon him at residential school" (1). Highway explains:

For long periods, I couldn't even look at [the manuscript]. I'm very angry at the English language. I wrote the book in Cree, really, and translated it as I went along. . . . The humor, the workings of the spirit world, the fact that Cree has no gender, the concept of god as two-spirited [at once male and female] — everything is so difficult to explain in English. And the business of [circular] time doesn't translate. (qtd. in Methot)

Whether music can overcome the problem of translation is a question that the novel raises at several points. Lacking "the referential density found in words or images," music distinguishes itself from language, a distinction that has given rise to the widespread perception of music as "a venue of transcendence" (Kramer, *Classical* 16). According to

Nietzsche, “compared with music all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common” (qtd. in Kramer, “Subjectivity” 124). In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, music’s unique capacity to accommodate the ineffable nuances and variety of experience allows it to resonate across cultures, offering the possibility of translation from one side of the postcolonial divide to the other.

From the beginning, the novel highlights the fluidity of musical experience. Part one, which tells of the Okimasis brothers’ childhood in Northern Manitoba, unleashes a rich universe of sound. Music first surfaces in the “hum” of the “white flame” that assumes the shape of the Fur Queen — Highway’s manifestation of the trickster, and a powerful figure of strength, good fortune, and transcendence throughout the novel (10). Linking the spiritual with the natural world, it is also heard in the wolf’s howl, “the string of notes arcing in a seamless, infinitely slow, infinitely sad glissando” (31), and in the “muted ostinato” of a distant herd of caribou making their way across the northern Canadian Shield (43). Like the Fur Queen’s “hum,” these sounds have a “pure” or elemental quality (10). Their music seems to rise, independent of human agency, out of the natural rhythms of the world itself. In a literal sense, classical music is absent from this predominantly Cree landscape — Jeremiah will have to wait until he moves to Birch Lake Residential School before he hears a piano, and Winnipeg before he hears the cadences of Bach, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff. Nonetheless, Highway establishes a narrative continuity between the classical and the Cree that complicates Mark Shackleton’s characterization of classical music as a “gift” of colonial culture (47). Using Italian musical terms (“glissando” and “ostinato”) to describe the sounds of wolves and caribou, Highway implies that the European tradition is merely one mode of capturing an experience that is unbounded by language and cultural differences. To similar effect, he describes young Champion/Jeremiah, who constantly interprets his world through music, “kicking into a tempo he would later come to know as *allegro con brio*” (25). In a swift and unassuming gesture, the retrospective narrator makes the “caribou song[s]” that the young boy squeaks out of his toy accordion — songs sung in Cree that connect him to “his father’s, his grandfather’s, and his great-grandfather’s legacy” (27) — prefigure the European repertoire that he will master in Winnipeg.

The harmonious blending of Cree and European musical legacies that characterizes part one opens a way of understanding Highway's Italian tempo instructions as contiguous, not only with the tradition of the piano sonata, but also with the landscape and musical rituals of Jeremiah's childhood. The "Allegro ma non troppo" pulsates through the wind-whipped landscape of the Trapper's Festival dogsled race, the births of Champion/Jeremiah and Ooneemeetoo/Gabriel, and the seasonal caribou-hunting expeditions that give shape to their world, mirroring in sound the exuberance of the Okimasis family history up to the point of Jeremiah's departure, at age six, for Birch Lake Residential School. Felt behind the rhythms and cadences of everyday life in the Northern Manitoba community of Eemanapiteepitat, the "Allegro" unifies the lively realm of sound and song in which the brothers spend the first years of their childhood. The tempo instructions that follow, marking each interval of the narrative as "Andante cantabile" ("moderate and singing"), "Allegretto grazioso" ("lively and graceful"), "Molto agitato" ("very agitated"), "Adagio espressivo" ("slow and expressive"), and "Presto con fuoco" ("fast with fire"), continue this synaesthetic effect. The reader is encouraged to feel and hear the words of the text through an overarching progression of tonal and rhythmic patterns. Among other things, the sense of unity that this creates blurs distinctions between cultures, aesthetic traditions, categories of "high" and "low" art, and other artificial constructions of difference.

At Birch Lake Residential School, music creates space for Jeremiah to revel in the sensations of home that the residential school otherwise precludes. Forced to give up Cree for the strange cadences of English, shorn of his hair and his birth name, and immersed in alien sights and sounds, Jeremiah acutely senses his vulnerability and dislocation. But in the midst of this harsh and unfamiliar environment, the sound of a piano is something to which he can immediately relate. It soothes him with sensations that are richly suggestive of the place he has left behind:

the music splashed him like warm, sweet water, in a cloud of black-and-yellow swallowtail butterflies. . . .

He wanted to listen until the world came to an end. His heart soared, his skin tingled, and his head filled with airy bubbles. . . . His lungs were two small fishing boats sailing through a rose-and-turquoise paisley-patterned sky, up towards a summer sun lined

with fluffy white rabbits' tails. His veins untwined, stretched, and swelled, until the pink, filmy ropes were filled to bursting with petals from a hundred northern acres of bee-sucked, honey-scented, fuchsia-shaded fireweed. (56-57)

In contrast with his new surroundings — which are cold, antiseptic, and oppressive with “the odour of metal and bleach” — the piano carries him into an alternate aesthetic realm that is warmly corporeal and “pretty as the song of chickadees in spring,” evocative of his northern landscape (56). Although its rhythms and textures may be unfamiliar, the music immediately makes sense to him and brings him pleasure, thereby accomplishing what English — that most definitively *unmusical* “queer new language that sounded like the *putt-putt-putt* of Happy Doll Magipom’s pathetic three-horsepower outboard motor” (52) — cannot.

## II. Music and Territory

Highway stops short of idealizing classical music as an escape from the alienating effects of transculturation, however. Subsequent descriptions of the piano imbue classical music with an irresolvable tension, revealing it as, in effect, creating the very distance it also works to bridge:

Jeremiah’s sixteenth notes played on. For six years, they played without pause. Sprouting wings, they lifted off Kamamagoos Island that autumn, honked farewell to Eemanapiteepitat twenty miles to the north, then soared in semi-perfect V-formation over the billowing waves of Mistik Lake, past the village of Wuchusk Oochisk, over the craggy rocks where the Mistik River joins the Churchill River, past Patima Bay, Chigeema Narrows, Flin Flon, and — following the route Abraham Okimasis had raced back in February 1951 — through Cranberry Portage to Oopaskooyak, where they touched down to slake their thirst on the memory of the Fur Queen’s kiss. After a detour of some years at the Birch Lake Indian Residential School twenty miles west of Oopaskooyak, the music curved south until it levelled onto the great Canadian plain and landed, just so, in the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, eight hundred miles south of Eemanapiteepitat, in the pink salon of another woman in white fur. (96)

The other “woman in white fur” is Lola van Beethoven, the piano teacher who will escort Jeremiah into the urban milieu of classical perform-

ance. In this powerfully ambiguous metaphor, the form of Jeremiah's piano playing does more than simply reflect his experience of leaving the north for Winnipeg; it *constitutes* that experience. Like a flock of geese, the musical notes perform the migration spanning the geographical and psychological distance that comes to separate Jeremiah from his family. The metaphor on the one hand intensifies the connection between Jeremiah's music and his Northern Manitoban landscape, while on the other it associates the art form with his move south, away from his roots and into a world in which he is markedly less at home.

The pathos of this predicament impacts the way classical music can be read (or, more aptly perhaps, heard) in the novel. While it continues to stand in for the community that Jeremiah has left behind, becoming "his one friend" in a city where he "seemed to be the only Indian person" (100), this music becomes entwined with profound feelings of loss. Jeremiah hears, for instance, "the keening of old Cree women at a wake" in the "wavering semitones" of the oboe at the ballet, and with his own playing conjures "marionette images" of people back home until he feels "the rhythm of his native tongue . . . bleeding through the music" (144, 101). In such images, music's associations with Jeremiah's home are elegiac, even painful, as the metaphorical "bleeding" conveys. Rather than instilling a sense of familiarity and belonging, they reinforce the Cree youth's loneliness and alienation in the white-dominated south, the familiar voices surfacing only to implore, "Come home, Jeremiah, come home; you don't belong there, you don't belong there" (101).

At the end of Bach's D-major Toccata, Jeremiah *does* go "back home" — not to the North, however (or to any geographical place, for that matter), but "to the tonic," or the first note in the scale (101). Supplanting the geographical meaning of "home" with a tonal one, Highway raises the possibility that music is itself a kind of territory. This idea carries a number of implications, one of which is that, in spite of its liberating "semantic indefiniteness" (Kramer, *Classical* 2), music is bound up in more restrictive — and, importantly, culturally embedded — forms of meaning. Musicologists working in the emergent fields of "new" or "cultural" musicology have increasingly explored the diverse ways in which this occurs.<sup>4</sup> In his recent study, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World*, Timothy Taylor elaborates on the territorial underpinnings of musical meaning, arguing, among other points, that the internal structures of classical music reflect modern notions of exotic

“others” that imperialism, colonialism, and globalization have produced. In particular, Taylor’s contention that musical tonality “achieves the same kind of spatialization” that early modern cartography created with its depictions of the New World establishes a provocative connection between tonal systems and colonial space (27). “Tonality,” he explains, “works by establishing a main key, from which the composer can move to other, subordinate keys, and move back in a kind of exploratory, cartographic mode” (27). Classical music thus fosters hierarchical relationships between keys that parallel those that colonial and imperial epistemologies imposed on lands and peoples.

If this is not a point that Highway expressly makes in his novel, its import can be felt in the way in which Jeremiah’s piano music becomes charged with political and territorial meaning. Even his scales, practised in his landlady’s living room in Winnipeg, are fraught with the history of colonial oppression, the “ticks and tocks” of the metronome reminding Gabriel, who listens on, of “the heartbeat of Christ, the grandfather clock in Father Bouchard’s Eemanapiteepitat parlour,” and of the priest’s insidious intrusions into community life (128). In a subtle echo of Father Bouchard’s divisive impact on his family back home, Jeremiah’s “endlessly repeated C-major scale” seems to hammer open the rift that is forming between himself and his brother in Winnipeg (129).

Of course, as both Taylor and Highway are well aware, and as Richard Middleton reminds us in his introduction to *The Cultural Study of Music*, “Music is more than notes” (2). The contexts and discourses surrounding the production and reception of music are also an important part of its meaning. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, classical music becomes contaminated by the social and territorial dynamics of the locations in which it is heard and performed. The piano remains troublingly connected, for instance, with the repressive Catholicism and horrifying sexual abuse that Birch Lake Residential School comes to represent. If, initially, Jeremiah’s encounter with the piano at the school is private and fully his own, as evidenced by the intimate sensuous quality of the images it evokes and their resonance with his home environment, it is not so for more than a brief moment. The young boy’s reveries are abruptly curtailed when “something soft and fleshy brushing up against his left shoulder made him flutter back down to Earth, unwillingly” (57). It is the groin of Father Lafleur, crucifix wedged in his sash, in an



image that eerily prefigures the sexual abuse that the Okimasis brothers will suffer at the hands of the priest.

This encounter is one of several that entangle music in the sexualized colonial power relations that subject Highway's Aboriginal characters to humiliating and even deadly violence throughout the novel. The association intensifies in Winnipeg, where it becomes impossible to separate classical music from some of the most destructive elements of Canada's colonial culture. With the city's Aboriginal population relegated to its subaltern spaces — basements, back alleys, and seedy, run-down bars — Winnipeg is the place where the chasms between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experience gape the widest and, for Jeremiah at least, are the most acutely felt. Music becomes involved in a series of juxtapositions that register the dissonance between the city's pretensions of European high culture and the disenfranchised Aboriginal population. In the image of "Evelyn Rose McCrae — long-lost daughter of Mistik Lake," reflected in "the curve of the propped-up piano top" of a Plexiglas-covered display advertising a concert by Vladimir Ashkenazy ("Russian pianist extraordinaire"), two vastly different worlds collide (106-07). Superimposed on the concert announcement, the reflection of a Cree woman who is subsequently raped and murdered not only highlights the gulf between these two worlds, but also subtly implicates the one in the other's condition. Highway establishes a relationship from which Jeremiah, whose C-major scales similarly frame disturbing images of the Aboriginal ghetto of Winnipeg's North Main Street and the brutal rape of another Cree woman in an alley behind, is not exempt (see 128-33).

At first, Jeremiah's foray into Winnipeg's classical music scene provides a welcome escape from the social ills plaguing Winnipeg's Aboriginal community. The "bittersweet melodies of Chopin's mazurkas" that he discovers in the listening booths of the Central Library, for instance, become a dreamy sea in which he "drown[s] himself . . . when avoiding North Main Street became an absolute necessity," the beauty of the music distracting him from his near-suicidal despair (170). But, as the trope of drowning intimates, music's protective function has a destructive dimension as well. Framed in opposition to the urban Powwow into which Jeremiah stumbles on his way home from the library, the same Chopin mazurkas that stave off suicide also cut him off from potentially productive and empowering mani-

festations of Aboriginal expression in the city. Ironically, the parallel between the inter-tribal dance he hears at the Powwow and Chopin's mazurkas — which are themselves derived from folk dances<sup>5</sup> — eludes him. Hearing only sounds that he feels certain “would have made the dead Polish composer rise from his grave in protest” (171), Jeremiah turns with disgust from the music closest to his own heritage. Closest to, perhaps, yet not *of* — for, as Ann-Adele Ghost rider reminds him, the Powwow invokes a tradition that has all but disappeared: “‘You northern people,’ she sighed, with nostalgia, ‘it’s too bad you lost all them dances, you know? All them beautiful songs? Thousands of years of . . . but never mind. We have it here’” (175). As if to confirm the elder’s lament, Jeremiah draws a blank: “‘What dances? What songs? ‘*Kimoosoom Chimasoo*’? The ‘Waldstein Sonata?’” (175). The absurd pairing of a Cree nonsense rhyme that translates into “Grandpa gets a hard-on, grandma runs away” (308) with a Beethoven sonata highlights the disjunction between the devalued musical traditions of Jeremiah’s ancestry and the esteemed Western European tradition to which he has temporarily — but nonetheless wholeheartedly — subscribed.

Significantly, this uncomfortable encounter is animated by more than simply a clash of cultures. Jeremiah’s aversion to the Powwow is fuelled as much by his perception of its inauthenticity as it is by his increasingly Eurocentric musical tastes. The recovery of tradition that Ann-Adele Ghost rider and her granddaughter, Amanda Clear Sky, celebrate as genuine is lost on Jeremiah. From across the divide, he sees only “Disney Indians . . . Hollywood Indians” engaging in a “perverse” attempt to “revive dead customs” to which he feels no connection in the basement of this “church gone to seed, blasted by fluorescence,” “in the middle of a city, on the cusp of the twenty-first century” (172-73). Amanda’s proudly borne regalia is to him a “ridiculous” “get-up” that fashions her into “the Princess Pocahontas” — an ambiguous figure whose authenticity has been subsumed by the generic and stereotypical iconography of white fantasy (172). Jeremiah’s reaction stems not only from a compelling criticism of what he feels is the empty performance of traditions bastardized by white popular culture via the likes of Buffalo Bill and John Wayne (171), but also from his own internalized racism. The language with which Highway captures Jeremiah’s distaste echoes some of the worst strains of colonialist rhetoric: a dancer pictured on a poster advertising the Powwow strikes him as “pagan, . . . primitive,”

even “Satanic”; the music he hears there offends him with its “primitive, half-formed species of tune” (162, 171).

Jeremiah’s embarrassment at the Powwow foreshadows a crisis of expression that is markedly postcolonial in its concerns and that, at its core, interrogates the notion of authenticity. Where does the Cree artist fit, the novel asks, and how can he articulate himself, “in the middle of a city, on the cusp of the twenty-first century”? Lola van Beethoven, who presides over Jeremiah’s musical training, embodies many of the tensions that this question registers. As “another woman in white fur” (96), Lola at once parallels and parodies the Fur Queen. In the latter respect, she functions as a kind of “anti-trickster.” As Highway explains, the trickster — “Weesageechak,” to the Cree — resides at the “core of Indian culture” and is “as pivotal and important a figure in our world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology” (“A Note”). By contrast, the anti-trickster is an oppositional, destabilizing force that encourages a turn away from Aboriginal ways of seeing. According to some indigenous thinkers, the anti-trickster can be summed up simply as “Eurocentrism”: while the trickster “emphasizes Aboriginal thought, . . . the ‘anti-trickster’ represents a cognitive force of artificial European thought, a differentiated consciousness, ever changing in its creativity to justify the oppression and domination of contemporary Indigenous peoples and their spiritual guardians” (Henderson 58).

In his own deployment of these forces, Highway rarely succumbs to the simplicity of binary constructions. Aligned both with white and Aboriginal culture, the Fur Queen is herself a hybrid figure who throughout the novel performs “double-edged enactments of promise and betrayal” (Brydon, “Tomson” 8). Lola’s opposition to her, then, is necessarily complicated. The model of benevolence, Lola inspires Jeremiah to work hard with the goal of winning the city’s prestigious competition in performance: “Five hours a day, six days a week,” she decrees, and in “five years, Jeremiah. Boom. The trophy” (101). The culmination of a fifteen-year obsession with the piano, Jeremiah’s all-consuming drive to win the Crookshank Memorial Trophy parallels the passion that motivates his father to win the Millington Cup at the World Championship Dog Derby in the first scene of the novel (11).

Like so many other threads of connection between Jeremiah’s piano playing and his family’s heritage, this one, too, is undermined by forces that threaten his identity and sense of belonging. Rather than marking

his triumphant arrival as an artist, his prize-winning performance of Rachmaninoff's *Preludes* lays bare the depth of his estrangement as a Cree man in Winnipeg. Coinciding with his brother Gabriel's departure for Toronto, the concert reverberates with feelings of loss, grief, and vulnerability. Before an audience of "pale white faces . . . staring, probing, judging him" (211), with not a single familiar person in the crowd,

Jeremiah played a northern Manitoba shorn of its Gabriel Okimasis, he played the loon cry, the wolves at nightfall, the aurora borealis in Mistik Lake; he played the wind through the pines, the purple of sunsets, the zigzag flight of a thousand white arctic terns, the fields of mauve-hued fireweed rising and falling like an exposed heart. (213)

Here, as elsewhere, sound, shape, colour, and movement bring Jeremiah's northern landscape and his European music together in a seductive whirl of associations. Revelling in the "re-creative and interpretive" elements of performance that open a single piece of music to multiple subjective meanings (Said, *Musical 2*), Highway represents the young pianist as an active creator who infuses Rachmaninoff's *Preludes* with personal expression. But the experience is embittered by the palpable loneliness that throbs, like the passage's "exposed heart," between its postcard images of loons, wolves, northern lights, and arctic terns. Jeremiah calls up a beautiful but wounded place, "shorn" of the most important person, at this moment in his life.

Compounding the anguish of Jeremiah's performance, Highway engages the problematic dialectic that Edward Said identifies between the "self-referential" qualities of musical interpretation and its public reception (*Musical 12*). At least in the context of postcolonial Canada, Highway suggests, they are stubbornly at odds. Highway gives us little reason to believe that Jeremiah's white audience and English judges, with their "ignorance of facts Aboriginal" (211), are at all sensitive to the deeply felt private expression that, ironically, is what makes his performance worthy of the trophy. The audience's disconnect from Jeremiah's experience is underscored by their ludicrous conjectures about his background, which range from speculations "that he was a Commanche Indian whose forebears had performed the chase scenes in the movie *Stagecoach*" to theories "that he came from the country's most remote and primitive hinterlands, where his father slaughtered wild animals and drank their blood in appeasement of some ill-tempered pagan deity"

(211, 212). Although privately Jeremiah's performance may well be an expression of lived emotions and relationships, publicly it becomes a spectacle onto which his white audience project their exotic fantasies about his Aboriginal heritage. Therefore, the narrative climax that might have celebrated Jeremiah's achievement as the "first Indian to win this gruelling contest in its forty-seven-year history" (214) instead underscores his failure to transcend the stereotypes that alienate him from white society. With his reflection in the bowl of the silver trophy eerily recalling the forlorn image of Evelyn Rose McCrae that haunts the concert hall poster, Jeremiah is paradoxically both on display and overlooked. His realization that, instead of enabling him to rise above its grim realities, classical music has only led him deeper into a territory in which he remains "infuriatingly alone," is too much for him to bear (215). Shattered, he does not play again for ten years.

### III. Dissonance and Counterpoint

In her reading of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Renate Eigenbrod emphasizes the artist's "need for community context as a basis for his art" (76). It would be wrong to suggest that classical music is lacking a community context in Highway's novel — the problem is, rather, the *kind* of community in which classical music is embedded. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* justifies the concern, common among a certain set of critics, that classical music has come to perpetuate "a narrow set of social interests" that serve a "shrinking, graying, and overly palefaced" audience (Kramer, *Classical* 4). From the English judges at the competition to the slick businessmen at the ballet, the glittering world of Highway's concert hall represents an elite echelon of society that is overwhelmingly wealthy, white, and oblivious to the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Significantly, the loudest voices that surface from within this privileged group are not those of sensitive patrons of the arts, but of crass capitalists who speak about the North as Canada's "uninhabited" "last frontier," "ripe for the plucking" (141). Jeremiah's feelings of pain and loss are symptoms of his music's ties to the hegemonic imperatives that such neocolonial attitudes express as much as they are a personal lament for his distant home and family.

Jeremiah's climactic performance exposes the limits of the Cree pianist's appropriation of what one Ojibway character later identifies as "whiteman music" — an art form that leaves Jeremiah tormented with the sense that he was "born on the wrong planet . . . era . . . [and

even] race” (256-57). The possibility of translation, so alluring in part one of the novel, suddenly seems ludicrous; there is, after all, no word for “concert pianist” in Cree (189). Moreover, by this point in the narrative, a backdrop of other northern scenes depicting a violent place increasingly scarred by clashes with colonial culture raises questions about the authenticity of Jeremiah’s musical expressions of this landscape. Indeed, Jeremiah is at a loss when he tries to think of a way to make classical music relevant to his home community: “What was he to do with Chopin? Open a conservatory on Eemanapiteepitat hill? Whip its residents into the Cree Philharmonic Orchestra?” (215). What, in other words, will he ever be able to express or create of his own with an art form that remains embedded in another place and another people — what, other than dislocation, isolation, and bitter longing as he looks across the great gaping chasm and realizes that he cannot “change the meaning of his past, the roots of his hair, the colour of his skin” (215)?

In Highway’s narrative, postcolonial dynamics and territorial issues exacerbate what may in fact be a broader problem arising from the structure and conditions of classical performance. As Said has argued, a romantic virtuoso model (symbolized, in many ways, by the nineteenth-century pianist) has turned the experience of music into an “extreme occasion” that has widened the gap between performer and listener (*Musical* 3). Western society’s “complete professionalization of performance” — discernible in its love of competitions, among other things<sup>6</sup> — has transformed music “from an ordinary, mainly domestic and private passage of time to an occasional, heightened public experience of the solo or concert repertory by a professional performer,” the “social abnormality” of which offers an “aesthetic alternative to the travails of ordinary human experience” (3, 10, 17, 19). Said’s distinction provides one way of understanding the difference between young Champion/Jeremiah’s caribou songs and his later performance of Rachmaninoff in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Played and sung outdoors with a spontaneity and vigour that echo his family’s movements across their northern landscape, his caribou songs rise out of the same energies that invigorate his everyday life. Their ritualized significance within this context is clear: if “performed with sufficient conviction,” the songs will bring a feast to his family (23). His classical repertoire, by contrast, draws him away from his immediate world, leading him into a dead end where he searches in vain for productive meaning.

Highway points to other limitations as well. Like the “humourless” English language (273), classical music appears as a medium of earnest ideas and serious emotions. Although a whimsical jubilation infuses Jeremiah’s earliest experiments with the piano, his music soon bears the weight of the world, but none of its levity. It represents, rather, the “intellect — pure, undiluted, precise,” that Jeremiah himself has become (205), expressing technical complexity and serious discipline rather than the “celebration” and “magic” that his spirit needs, as the Fur Queen tells him in no uncertain terms:

This is what Miss Maggie thinks. We dance, we cry, make love, we laugh and work and play, we die. Then we wake up, in the dressing room, with make-up all over the goddamn place, sweating so you smell like dog’s crotch. I mean, get over it, Alice. You ain’t got much time before that grand finale. So you get your little Cree ass out there. Just don’t come here wastin’ my time going, ‘Oh, boo-hoo-hoo-hoo, poor me, oh, boo.’ (233)

As Jeremiah discovers, the irreverent humour of Aboriginal characters such as Jimmy Roger Buck (a mischievous parody of Johann Sebastian Bach?) can be “more potent than Chopin and Bach and Rachmaninoff combined” (219). Without humour, music struggles to accommodate the Cree worldview and its central spiritual force, the shape-shifting, fun-poking trickster: “Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap-oh-you-should-hear-the-things-they-call-me-honeypot-Sees, weaver of dreams, sparker of magic, showgirl from hell” (233-34). In the end, it is this brazenly ludic figure, looking “as though she had North, South, and Central America shoved up the crack of her furry little ass,” and not Vladimir Ashkenazy, or any other virtuoso of classical music, who eventually sits down at a piano to play “the most beautiful song [Jeremiah] had ever heard” (234).

Given the disillusioning shift in classical music’s thematic significance over the course of the novel, the Italian tempo instructions that structure the narrative might be read as increasingly problematic reminders of the narrow, rigid, and oppressive cultural milieu that frustrates the Cree artist. But despite Highway’s palpable critique of this milieu, the musical markers are not expressly undermined by the text. On the contrary, they continue to serve a direct expressive function, enhancing the impact of each of the novel’s six parts by setting their emotional pace with noticeable precision. The “Molto agitato” that opens part four

fittingly portends the agitation that grows in intensity until virtually exploding through the climactic performance of Rachmaninoff that takes place in the section's final chapter. The "Adagio espressivo" direction to part five evokes the slow and quiet pain of Jeremiah's depression and soul-searching. And finally, the "Presto con fuoco," or "fast with fire," that completes the novel's classical music structure is richly resonant with its subtle echo of the narrative's many references to fireweed, which symbolizes healing and renewal.<sup>7</sup>

Heard against Jeremiah's renewed exploration of Cree forms of artistic expression, the "Presto con fuoco" signals not a final privileging of classical music but, rather, an exciting foray into a new, hybrid art. In its metaphorical fire lies the spark that kindles a creative regeneration for Jeremiah and, indeed, for classical music. For although the feeling "that he cannot be both Indian and a classical pianist" motivates his abandonment of the European art form (Reder 288), the realization not only that he *can*, but that he *must* use his training as a pianist to reconnect with his Indian-ness is what spurs the creative awakening that reunites him with his brother and gives him access to a positive artistic community. The final third of the novel traces Jeremiah's tentative return from a "purgatory" of six years as a social worker "scraping drunks off the street[s]" in Winnipeg, to music as an expression of "celebration" and "magic" that, the Fur Queen reminds him, will "massage [his] tired, trampled-on old soul" (221, 233).

This return reinvests music with the celebratory tone that is so prominent in part one. Admittedly, "return" might not actually be the most appropriate word here, for Jeremiah resurrects classical performance only to explode the art form and turn it into something altogether different. In a Toronto church turned dance studio, Gabriel urges his downtrodden brother to "Play!":

First came his left hand, pounding on its own a steel-hard, unforgiving four-four time, each beat seamlessly connected by triplet sixteenth-notes, an accidental toccata. From where? 'Ha!' Before he knew it, his other hand had joined, its discords like random gunshots: *bang, bang!*

No less surprised, and tickled bubble-gum pink, Gabriel leapt to his feet and started rocking to the pulse — *peeyuk, neesoo, peeyuk* . . . Some spectacular celebration was about to begin, he could feel



it in his bones. ‘*Weeks’chilooew!*’ he yodelled, and catapulted his dancer’s frame at space. (265-66; original ellipsis)

This impromptu performance, pierced through with “accidental” and “random” elements of improvisation, frees the musician and his music from their shackles. The “steel-hard, unforgiving” tempo in which Jeremiah begins is disrupted, first by the “random gunshots” of his right hand, then by his brother’s exuberant “Weeks’chilooew!” Translated into “the wind’s a-changing!” (310), this outburst of Cree announces the transformation of an art form that has become rigid and dead into something flexible and alive. Gabriel blows apart his brother’s “world of mirrors, repetitions, imitations” (which is how Said describes the piano in *Reflections*, 216), opening his music to the influence of Aboriginal modes of expression in a symbolic reversal of the act of colonial penetration. So begins the collaborative process through which Jeremiah comes into his own as an artist — not, importantly, as a performer singularly fettered to classical music, as he was earlier in the novel, but as a composer, playwright, and creator in his own right whose art reflects the heterogeneity and conflict of the society in which he lives.

Said writes of “that faculty music has to travel, cross over, drift from place to place in a society, even though many institutions and orthodoxies have sought to confine it” (*Musical* xix). In the spirit of such “transgression” (xix), Highway not only sets music adrift, allowing it to intersect with and play off other art forms, but also breaks it apart, exposing the fissures in which the seeds of a new art might take root. In its riotous mixing of different genres (dance, theatre, poetry, music, and drumming) and cultural influences (European and Aboriginal), the performance that emerges from Jeremiah’s classical improvisation embraces “the clangour and dissonance of the twentieth century” (267) and fulfils Neal McLeod’s prediction that “emerging forms of Aboriginal consciousness, including Cree forms, will be hybridized forms” (33). This is also true of the novel itself, which, “complicated by its [own] interaction with other generic traditions” (Brydon, “Tomson” 10), anticipates Jeremiah’s hybrid creations. (Indeed, the novel is an equally transculturated form, and any questions that Highway asks of classical music must be asked of it as well). At both its thematic and structural levels, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* captures the “mess[iness] and compromis[e]” of postcolonial experience (13), holding up a mirror to the clashes and fragmentations that define postcolonial space. At the same time, its

electrifying combination of cultural and linguistic elements reveals the creative potential of the contact zone by drawing energy from the interpenetration of Aboriginal and European forms and traditions. The book is, after all, a product of its author's sense of the richness as well as the compromises of his own transculturated background.<sup>8</sup> Highway incorporates the dissonance and chaos that proceed from colonial and neocolonial encounters into a unique and elaborate creation that is often as beautiful as it is jarring.

The political force of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* lies in its ultimate refusal to privilege any single cultural or generic influence. If this is a novel in which "Cree perspectives survive, but in reconstituted and ambiguous forms" (Brydon, "Tomson" 8), the same must be said of the European traditions with which it engages. A sonata-as-novel (or novel-as-sonata), *Kiss of the Fur Queen* continually gestures beyond the confines of any given art form or cultural tradition. The *Künstlerroman* opens itself to musical composition, myth, song, dance, theatre, and history. European, languages open themselves to Aboriginal ones, and vice versa. Eigenbrod aptly describes the novel's juxtaposition of Cree, English, and musical terminology as "contrapuntal" — a technique that, as Ajay Heble also underscores, begets "a cultural listening which 'involves a salutary process of dehierarchization'" (Eigenbrod, and Heble qtd. in Eigenbrod 76). Although popularized in literary circles by Said, who uses the term to describe his postcolonial reading strategy,<sup>9</sup> counterpoint has its origins in theories of harmony, and thus it represents yet another way in which classical music can be felt in Highway's text. Unlike compositional techniques that feature a dominant melody supported by subordinate harmonies, in counterpoint no single musical line takes precedence over another. Rather, many melodies play out simultaneously, at times intersecting, at others diverging, in an intricate dance — as in a canon or fugue. Mustapha Marrouchi's contention that counterpoint "presents an image of equality in formal relations and democracy among participating voices, an image . . . of a human set-up in which the competitive stress of the piano business (symbolized by the virtuoso piano concerto) would have no part" (102), provides a way of understanding Jeremiah's subversion of the classical performance model in the final part of the book.

It is tempting to look to this musical aesthetic as prescriptive of a more equitable social order, and to see Highway, like Kateri Damm,

“standing midstream” imagining — and in imagining, creating — the “minglings” that “can bridge the gap, open the borders, tear down the walls of the colony” (24). But as Heble observes, the contrapuntal juxtaposition of equal-but-different voices is often dissonant, the “cultural listening” that it invites a difficult negotiation of contesting sounds (30). Highway’s novel preserves this feeling of being out of tune. As in Homi Bhabha’s “Third Space” and Richard White’s “middle ground,”<sup>10</sup> in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* the ideal of translation continues to be elusive and, correspondingly, understanding only partial.<sup>11</sup> Highway’s contrapuntal hybrid aesthetic does not so much bridge as dwell in the “slippages — cultural cracks in-between settler and First Nations societies” that, as Dee Horne argues, must be seen not just as chasms to be transcended, but also as productive spaces in themselves (79). It is in these spaces that music comes to rest. Embodying the legacies of colonialism, it must mourn the violence and loss as well as celebrate the enduring beauty and resilience of the human spirit.

Unlike its beginning, the novel ends not with music but with silence. As he lies dying of AIDS, Gabriel’s spirit is ushered from his body with a kiss and a wink from the Fur Queen, but no sound. The silence of the novel’s closing pages does not fall with the finality and emptiness of secular death, however. Rather, like Gabriel’s passing from the earthly realm to a spiritual one, it signals not an end but a pause — in the language of Jeremiah’s and Highway’s music, a “rest” — between what has been and what is yet to come.

### AUTHOR’S NOTE

I wish to thank Diana Brydon, Jennifer Esmail, Ilana Stanger-Ross, and Eric Adams for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this essay, and my anonymous reviewers for their helpful and encouraging guidance in its final stages. A portion of this paper, in its embryonic form, was presented at ACCUTE in 2004.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I use the term “postcolonial” in relation to Canada with necessary reservations; as Diana Brydon urges us to remember, Canada has far from transcended its “unsavoury colonial history of theft and oppression, a history whose consequences remain to be addressed and redressed,” and which persist in neocolonial formations and relationships (“Canada”

49-50). Accordingly, “the ‘post’” in postcolonial “does not refer to the end of colonialism, but rather to what was formed under colonialism and remains after official colonialism is abandoned” (56).

<sup>2</sup> Like Highway’s brother, René, Gabriel is a ballet dancer. Both brothers, then, are examples of transculturated artists.

<sup>3</sup> “Contact zone” is Mary Louise Pratt’s now widely used term for those “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination,” such as are created by colonialism (4).

<sup>4</sup> “Only since around 1990 has there been a concerted effort to ascribe complex, broadly intelligible meanings to music” that are not merely emotional or intuitive, Kramer explains (“Subjectivity” 125). Since then, “widespread interest in the interaction of music with social and cultural forms” has made it possible to understand music as historically situated, and, therefore, politically charged (126). The essays in Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton’s collection *The Cultural Study of Music* (2003) attest to the range of implications of this realization.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Diana Brydon for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>6</sup> See Said’s *Reflections* 224.

<sup>7</sup> Deanna Reder reads Highway’s fireweed imagery as suggestive of the artist who “flourish[es] in burnt soil not to forget the fire but inscribe within [his] own beauty the colours of the fire that testify to [his] survival and finally, to constantly assume further incarnations” (290-91).

<sup>8</sup> Highway has explained that he sees himself as equipped “. . . with the wisdom of Homer and Faulkner and Shakespeare and Bach and Beethoven and Rembrandt and McLuhan and many other thinkers, artists, and philosophers of the white world. But equipped, as well, with the wisdom and the vision of Big Bear and Black Elk and Chief Seattle and Tom Fiddler and Joe Highway and the medicine people, the visionaries of my ancestry — and the Cree language in all its power and beauty.” (qtd. in Acoose 34)

<sup>9</sup> See *Culture and Imperialism* 66-67.

<sup>10</sup> Bhabha locates this space at “the ‘inter’ — the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space — that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (38-39). White’s “middle ground” is an ambiguously creative space “in between cultures [and] peoples” that is partially, if not largely, defined by productive “misunderstandings” (White x).

<sup>11</sup> Nowhere did this become more apparent to me — a non-Cree-speaker — than in reading the novel’s glossary of Cree terms, which, in the process of attempting to increase, also underscored the limits of my understanding of Highway’s Cree characters and dialogue.

## WORKS CITED

- Acoose, Janice. “Post Halfbreed: Indigenous Writers as Authors of Their Own Realities.” Armstrong 27-44.
- Armstrong, Jeannette, ed. *Looking at the Words of our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*. Penticton: Theytus, 1993.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1995.

- Brydon, Diana. "Canada and Postcolonialism: Questions, Inventories, and Futures." *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*. Ed. Laura Moss. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003. 49-77.
- . "Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Contemporary Postcolonial Debates." Unpublished draft, 2003.
- Chamberlin, J. Edward. *If This is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground*. Toronto: Knopf, 2003.
- Clayton, Martin, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, eds. *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Damm, Kateri. "Says Who: Colonialism, Identity and Defining Indigenous Literature." *Armstrong* 9-26.
- Eigenbrod, Renate. "Not Just a Text: 'Indigenizing' the Study of Indigenous Literatures." *Eigenbrod and Episkenew* 69-88.
- Eigenbrod, Renate, and Jo-Ann Episkenew, eds. *Creating Community: A Roundtable on Canadian Aboriginal Literature*. Brandon: Bearpaw; Penticton: Theytus, 2002.
- Grace, Sherrill E. *Canada and the Idea of North*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2001.
- Heble, Ajay. "Sounds of Change: Dissonance, History, and Cultural Listening." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 71 (2000): 26-36.
- Henderson, James (Sakej). "Postcolonial Ghost Dancing: Diagnosing European Colonialism." *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Ed. Marie Battiste. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2000. 57-76.
- Highway, Tomson. *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1998.
- . "A Note on the Trickster." *Kiss*. N. pag.
- Hodgson, Heather. "Survival Cree, or Weesakeechak dances down Yonge Street: Heather Hodgson speaks with Tomson Highway." *Books in Canada* 28.1 (1999): 2-5.
- Horne, Dee. "Settler Culture Under Reconstruction." *Diverse Landscapes: Re-reading Place Across Cultures in Contemporary Canadian Writing. Select Proceedings of the Interpretation-National Regions Conference*. Ed. Karin Beeler and Dee Horne. Prince George: U of Northern British Columbia P, c.1996. 79-98.
- Kramer, Lawrence. *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.
- . "Subjectivity Rampant! Music, Hermeneutics, and History." Clayton et al. 124-35.
- Marrouchi, Mustapha. "Variation on a Theme: Edward Said on Music." *ARIEL* 32.2 (2001): 91-123.
- McLeod, Neal. "Coming Home Through Stories." *(Ad)dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures*. Ed. Armand Garnet Ruffo. Penticton: Theytus, 2001. 17-36.
- Methot, Suzanne. "The Universe of Tomson Highway: In Cree cosmology, everything's in balance, everything's connected and nothing's without value." *Quill & Quire* 64.11 (Nov 1998): 1.
- Middleton, Richard. Introduction. "Music Studies and the Idea of Culture." Clayton et al. 1-15.
- Morrow, Martin. "Journey Man: The Nomadic Tomson Highway Talks About Writing the First Cree Opera." *CBCNews.ca*. 13 Feb. 2008. 10 July 2008. <[www.cbc.ca/arts/theatre/highway.html](http://www.cbc.ca/arts/theatre/highway.html)>.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Reder, Deanna. "Stories of Destruction and Renewal: Images of Fireweed in Autobiographical Fiction by Shirley Sterling and Tomson Highway." *Eigenbrod and Episkenew* 275-94.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

- . *Musical Elaborations*. New York: Columbia UP, 1991.
- . *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Shackleton, Mark. "Tomson Highway: Colonizing Christianity versus Native Myth — From Cultural Conflict to Reconciliation." *Missions of Interdependence: A Literary Directory*. Ed. Gerhard Stilz. New York: Rodopi, 2002. 41-51.
- Taylor, Timothy. *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. 27.
- White, Richard. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.