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# **Wesageechak and the Weetigo: The Formation and Definition of Dancer Okimasis' Identity in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen***

María Elena Villablanca Fuenzalida<sup>1</sup>

This paper contends that by looking beyond the traumatic experiences of the brother-protagonists of Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, we can find a message of hope and reconciliation, not found in existing interpretations of the novel. Within this we also find positive examples of gender identities that fall outside of traditional understandings of gender.

KEY WORDS: Tomson Highway, gender fluid, residential schools

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In Cree, Ojibway, etc., unlike English, French, German, etc., the male-female-neuter hierarchy is entirely absent. So that by this system of thought, the central hero figure from our mythology –theology, if you will—is theoretically neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously. (*Kiss of the Fur Queen*)

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* was written by Tomson Highway, who is a descendant of the Cree Barren Land First Nation, from the Brochet village located in northern Manitoba, Canada. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* deals with the lives of two Cree brothers: Champion and Dancer Okimasis, who received Catholic names and were sent to a residential catholic school where they were sexually abused by one of the priests. The novel was, according to some interviews, written as a semi-autobiographical text inspired by his and his brother's experience in residential schools in their childhood and was written in dedication to his brother Rene who, like Ooneemetoos Okimasis, was a dancer and died after acquiring HIV. In an interview with Suzanne Methot, Highway explained that he “didn't have a choice, [...] [he] *had* to write this book. It came screaming out because this story needed desperately to be told” (1). Because of its close connection with the Highway brothers, the text is supposed to have a therapeutic quality which would have made it so that Tomson Highway could simply not ignore, as it was brewing in his mind.

Existing studies of the novel have focused on the post-colonial aspects of the text as well as the connotations of having a character ‘turned homosexual’ due to the trauma lived in his past. Milena Bubenechik's *Trauma Novels in Postcolonial Literatures* (2012) and “Surviving the Residential School System: Resisting Hegemonic Canadianness in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*” by Richard J. Lane (2002) focus on how Champion and Dancer, known as Jeremiah and Gabriel by their Catholic teachers, were negatively affected by the loss of their culture and innocence in

Residential Schools. In this paper, I will stray from those conceptions of inherent pain and loss to show different aspects of the novel, such as the personal gains of the characters, most specifically Dancer, and how despite everything the brothers endured, both manage to go back to their culture and grow beyond those bad experiences.

Since the novel is written from Champion Okimasis's point of view, the reader is compelled to focus on the pain of the story, as some reviewers have stated: "[t]his is a very sad book; at points there seems to be very little hope for the characters, and even at the end of the novel, it could be argued there is still none" (Canadian book review) and focus on the tortuous journey of the brothers. While this approach allows the reader to find out things at the same time as Champion does, it also hinders the understanding of the novel *beyond* Champion's point of view and limitations. Because of this, I will analyse the novel straying from Champion's narration to piece together the moments that were fundamental in the formation of Ooneemeetoo Okimasis' identity and character. This choice will be useful to reveal the things that made Dancer's story differ from his brother's in both tone and outcome. Therefore, I will be able to pinpoint the moments in which Ooneemeetoo's self-image and identity were compromised, undone, and redone, following a long process of (re)configuration until it reached the point in which he could comfortably identify himself according to his own rules and using his own words. The aim of doing this is to be able to see an underlying story inside the novel that does not focus on the wounds inflicted by the residential school, but rather on the ways in which people can heal and find solace in different ways.

Because this investigation will follow the story of Ooneemeetoo Okimasis instead of Champion's as would be the norm, the focus of this paper will be Ooneemetoo's tale of success in the face of adversity. The fact that Dancer is able to reach a point in the story in which he can comfortably see himself and identify himself as someone who can embrace his native culture and the

small things that comprise his self –both good and bad—are signs that he manages to succeed against all odds. After being submitted to the damaging experiences in the residential school and then later on having been sent into the city without the support of his parents and with a brother that pulled further and further away from him, Dancer should have succumbed into a depression or at least have lost his way, but he does not. Instead of giving up and into the tumult of bad emotions inside of him, Ooneemetoo reaches out to native communities and bohemian circles that enable him to explore himself and the world in a manner that his brother would never consider. Thus, Dancer's fragmented identity, leftover of his time in school, is slowly pieced together through his belonging to different communities and his ability to embrace himself and his sexual urges without fear or shame.

Ultimately, this paper is not only an investigation about *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and its characterization of the Okimasis brothers, but also an invitation to consider the story beyond Champion's point of view; to see the underlying tale of beauty, healing and reconstruction of a fragmented identity. With this paper I invite people to see more than just a tale full of bumps in the road and self-destruction at every corner, but as a journey in which two brothers recover from their past experiences of pain and manage to find solace and home in the return to their native roots.

The connotations behind the brothers' names denote a vital part of the characters, especially the names given to them by Father Bouchard during their baptism which appear to be a cross they are meant to carry throughout their lives. Champion and Dancer Okimasis are given the Catholic names Jeremiah and Gabriel respectively by the priest in charge of their homeland. These names have religious connotations that follow them throughout the story. In the Catholic tradition Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet because of his fate predicted by God in which he would be shunned and attacked by many because of the things he would reveal. Jeremiah's story is about

being alone against the world knowing terrible truths about his and Dancer's life in the residential but unlike the prophet Champion chooses to remain silent about it so as not to cause troubles at home or being forced to confront what happened to them. Gabriel, on the other hand, refers to one of the Archangels, of the higher hierarchy of angels, and is known by everyone because he is the deliverer of important prophetic messages to the servants of God, which can be seen in Dancer since he is able to reach out to others and re-tell their story for the benefit of others and himself. Both brothers are supposed to know and speak truths to other people, but unlike Jeremiah, Gabriel will be listened to by others since he is the bringer of joy and new life.

In the novel, The Okimasis brothers had to be sent away to school to be taught how to be proper Catholic children, and to learn Canadian customs and language. As the brothers arrive to the residential school that had been assigned to them, they are stripped from their Cree names, their mother tongue, and forced to use the names that Father Bouchard assigned to them during their baptism. This, following Angela Van Essen's (2012) theory of Cree language in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, would work as a way of severing the ties that connect the brothers to their land and culture, since Cree language not only serves as a way to communicate with people of the same tribe but it also creates a sense of belonging to a place and history (2). By severing those ties, they are not only depriving the brothers and other children from their means of communication but also taking away a vital part of their identity and agency, exchanging them for tools they do not know how to use yet and which were forced upon them. According to Van Essen, the variety of Cree used by Highway is called 'Woods Cree' and it "functions as a signature of belonging to a community [and] at the same time, it maps [the] characters onto the land and evoked their connection to it even when they are elsewhere" (3). Analyzing the type of language used by the narrator and the characters, Cree versus Ojibway, serves as a reminder of where the characters come from and their sense of belonging. I

believe that Highway not only decided to use a mixture of ‘Woods Cree’ and English in his novel to connect and denote the hybrid lives of the characters but also as a manner to reach out to the readers, more specifically Cree readers, to give them an instance they might share with the characters in private; Highway does not offer a translation for them and some are actual made up names that turn out to be jokes, as he explains in an interview with Heather Hodgson. An example of this is Eemanapiteepitat, the name of the village where Dancer and Champion were born, “[i]n English it would mean ‘he pulls *her* teeth or *his* teeth’, as a dentist would. But it isn’t funny in English [...] there’s no humour in it at all when it’s translated into English” (Hodgson).

In a similar way, the Navajo writer Laura Tohe refers to her own experience in residential schools in her book *No Parole Today* (1999), saying that “[t]he most crippling legacy of boarding schools is the devastation of our native languages and culture (...) Separation from home, land, and culture equals loss of identity and language” (ix). Thus by going through this process of seclusion in residential schools, people were changed and remade to fit into a society that would not welcome them no matter what. Children had to renounce their origins and culture in order to have a small chance at finding a place within the dominant society that forced them to blend in without really giving them any substantial tools to do so.

In addition to this severed identity, the brothers went through a more physical sort of abuse during their time in the school. A while after his arrival to the residential school, Ooneemeetoo is sexually assaulted by one of the priests that taught there: Father Lafleur. This narration is given from the point of view of Champion which makes the relaying of the facts fragmented and doubtful, and gives it the quality of an unreliable, feverish dream.

Only later we learn that Champion went through the same abusive experience but was forcing himself to ignore it and forget it as illustrated in this quote where he and his girlfriend

Amanda are sharing a bed and he is reminded of what happened with Father Lafleur, “Jeremiah shuddered; a worm was inside him. Or a... No, no, Champion-Jeremiah, we won’t think about that. Not now. Not ever. That door is closed” (Kiss of the Fur Queen 259). Both brothers were submitted to rape but the event had very different ramifications for each of them; while Dancer took hold of this experience and fought to overcome it, his brother Champion chose to put it away and pretend that it never happened. This caused Champion’s retelling of the fact to be stilted and hazy, almost like a nightmare. Judith Herman refers to this quality of dealing with trauma and how it affects people in her book *Trauma and Recovery* expressing that:

People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom. (1)

This fact not only turns Champion into an unreliable narrator, but also serves as evidence of his mental state long after leaving the residential school and beginning his life away from home. He is cut off from his family and culture in an alien place, after being submitted to the loss of his language and hurt in such a way that he cannot trust other people. Thus he is alone and sinking into a quiet desperation, as illustrated by the following quote:

he thanked God that he had learned his father’s lessons on solitude: how time alone could be spent without need for crying, that time alone was time for shaping thoughts that make the path your life should take, for cleaning your spirit of extraneous –even poisonous- matter [...] but father, [...] you never told us how to spend time alone in the midsts of half a million people. Here stars don’t shine at night, trees don’t speak (Kiss of the Fur Queen 103).



After being raped and stripped of his language, Champion is consumed by loneliness and the experiences he lived at school keep him from reaching out to others. It would seem that now for him there is nothing more than a vast and all-consuming silence where there is supposed to be light and sound. In a manner of speaking, even before Champion acknowledges his trauma, he has already given up on life. Thus, the way in which the brothers deal with their experiences in the school, the priest's abuse, and the forceful removal of their culture sets them apart from each other for most of the novel. While Champion tries to get lost in the haze of the city and the music that was taught to him at school in order to distract himself from his thoughts, Ooneemeetoo rebels against the teachings of the priests and embraces the only native language he has left: his body.

Dancer manages to deal with the trauma of their school life first by finding solace in a dance studio where he discovers that “he was free of gravity, trying out this newfound language that spoke to him in a way nothing else had ever done” (153) and then by embracing who he is and taking control of sexual life, something Champion is unable to do because it reminds him of being raped. Furthermore, he is able to see in the indigenous community something that is invisible to Jeremiah's numbed senses; upon witnessing a Pow Wow in which both brothers felt a sense of alienation at the beginning, Dancer is able to discover a new means of communicating to people and the spiritual world, which had been unattainable to him after his life in the residential school. In one of the dances he sees “people talking to the sky, the sky replying. And he knew he had to learn this dance. Someday soon, he may need it” (245) thus he acquires a new language that, as he predicted, would help him in the end to deal with his trauma by sharing it with a community and embracing what happened to them.

According to Lewis Herman, the overcoming of the trauma comes in three stages, though they may not have a linear relationship and the importance of each of them will vary depending on

the subject. The three stages are: 1) establishing a safe environment, which has three stages as well (naming the problem, restoring control, and establishing a safe environment); 2) remembrance and mourning, where “the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (Trauma and Recovery 125); and finally 3) reconnecting after the trauma, stage in which “the survivor faces the task of creating a future. [they have] mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now [they] must develop a new self [...] new relationships. [...] In accomplishing this work, the survivor reclaims [their] world” (141).

The story of failure or hopelessness would be Jeremiah’s because he does not manage to enter the very first stage of dealing with his trauma since he can neither acknowledge there was a traumatic experience nor restore control over what has happened in order to reach a level of safety that would enable him to move on. Ooneemeetoo, on the other hand, is able to go through the first stage of the path to recovery when he names what has happened to them, asking his brother to acknowledge it as well, and then by not allowing his rapist to taint his sexual drive and allowing himself to enjoy the pleasure of having sex with another man. He establishes a safe environment for himself by entering a community of people who understand what he went through and enable him to express this through his dancing, something which makes his audience “[speak] to some space inside themselves, some void that needed filling, some depthless sky; and this sky was responding” (Kiss of the Fur Queen 267)

For Ooneemeetoo, dance is what connects the second and third stages since the discovery of this new language of the body enables him to communicate with others and also provides him with a career path. He knows he has found his true calling and is not shy about wanting to show and portray the things that happened to his brother and him, to make others understand. He knows he

wants to do this, and he is good at it, so his future is shaped and designed by this innate ability to dance joined to his wish to purge the bad memories of his childhood. As Rachid Belghiti explains in his text “Choreography, Sexuality and the Indigenous Body in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*”, dance provides a platform in which Ooneemeetoo can freely express himself in a language that transcends colonization and time, so that others who have not gone through this experience can understand his pain and mourn with him. It is this language that allows him to return to the sense of a community, to belong somewhere his brother cannot. By embracing these circumstances and using something so inherently his, he manages to move forward and embrace the small fractured pieces left behind by the residential school and is able to connect with others. Therefore, Ooneemeetoo is able to embrace a new unfolding identity that like a dance is always moving, fluid and sensual.

In the interview with Header Hodgson, Highway expressed that “[d]ance is a metaphor for everything in our culture: for ritual, for art, for religion. Dance is a metaphor for being, so if we cannot dance, we cannot pray” (1). Dance is very important to aboriginal cultures since it is a representation of the relationship between the spirit world and the world of the living. The kind of dance that Ooneemeetoo performs throughout the novel, with its circular movements, is a metaphor for the important balance in native cultures with the spiritual world. By giving Dancer the innate ability to dance, and then present him with the tools necessary to learn the language of the body to communicate without words, Ooneemeetoo’s characterization enables him to find meaning in his life, and embrace his self, changing and evolving into a being that could love himself and thrive even after being pushed down and silenced. In the end, Dancer brings joy and catharsis to his brother and himself, his voice is loud and clear through the movement of his body and he is free from the trauma of his past.

There is an underlying dichotomy in Highway's novel, in which the reader might be guided to follow the narration of defeat and pain of the brothers while ignoring the tale of hope and joy that is so closely interwoven with the first one. This dichotomy is what I will refer to as the Trickster/Weetigo duality. The Trickster or Wesageechak and the Weetigo are in contradictory positions in the sense that while the former is a benevolent spirit, the central heroic figure of Cree culture, offering protection and speaking of life and rebirth, the latter is a dark spirit that haunts people, and forces them to commit unspeakable acts, such as cannibalism. In the novel we see both entities represented in two polarities: the Trickster is represented by the figure of the Fur Queen who is the patron of the Okimasis family as well as other varied female characters who speak sense into Champion while defying his world view, and the Weetigo, who is seen as the evil cannibalistic spirit that forces the Okimasis brothers –most specifically Champion- to have bad thoughts and behave inappropriately. Moreover, the Weetigo is also represented as the incarnation of pedophilia, which is something that haunts the brothers, to different extents. This direct relationship can be seen when Champion explains to a group of children that “[a] Weetigo is a monster who eats little boys” (271) and then one of the boys stays behind to inform him that he had been eaten by a Weetigo. At first Champion does not understand, but then he talks with people from the office of the school and they inform him that the stepfather who had raped the little boy was already being prosecuted (272).

With these references to the Weetigo and a narrator that follows Champion's thoughts and ideas, the reader might be compelled to focus only on the atrocities the brothers went through. Since the fear for the Weetigo and his desire to never stray from the norm of Canadian society are so strong in Champion, the narrator is forced to make references to these things while ignoring others' ideas, such as Dancer's or other characters that try to bring Champion out of his hiding place, going

so far as to react with repulsion whenever his worldview is shaken. Thus, the reader will have to follow his trains of thought and could be guided into not seeing the underlying tale of the Wesageechak inside Dancer's own storyline.

The full dichotomy of these two representations is clearly seen in Champion's guided narration as he does not embrace either of the figures and remains wary of both the advice and the temptation. Theologically speaking, the Trickster is able to take in the pain and suffering inflicted on them by the Weetigo and grow from it, since the latter is constantly going against Wesageechak. The Trickster has had to learn to take in the punches and the pain and build their character from them, without rejecting or ignoring any of it. This is a dangerous image for Champion because it implies that he has to stop running away from what happened to him and Dancer; it means reliving the trauma in a way that he cannot control. Ooneemeetoo's sexual encounters with men help him feel tethered and alive; they help him take the corporeal act of sex away from the abuse of his childhood because he has the power of choosing his partner.

The mythology of the Wesageechak or Trickster, and the Weetigo, is representative of the Okimasis brothers' internal and external conflicts created by the clashing of two cultures. The Wesageechak represents the duality that should be inherent to the brothers, the manner in which they can defend themselves against the opposing forces that take them away from their homes, and the Weetigo stands for not only the external forces that push them apart, but also the distance between the brothers. By not being able to embrace the Trickster, Champion sets himself apart from his brother who he sees as something like the Weetigo in his depravity, a view that can be illustrated when Champion tells Ooneemeetoo, "How can you let someone do what that disgusting old priest did to you? How can you seek out... people like that?" (Kiss of the Fur Queen 207) to which his

brother replies “You’re dead, Jeremiah. At least my body is alive.” (207) making the rift between them deeper and broader.

While Champion should find comfort in the image of his family’s patron and the central hero of his culture, he cannot fully commit to it because doing so would imply opening himself up to the experiences he has been locking away inside his mind, and would lead him to be like his brother, something that scares him: “[h]e clamped his eyes shut, swallowed hard, and willed his body dead. It existed no longer; from this day on, he was intellect-pure, undiluted, precise” (Kiss of the Fur Queen 205). For Champion, Ooneemetoos is constantly reliving the trauma by allowing other men to do to him what father Lafleur did, which both disappoints and disgusts him as shown by his reaction upon seeing Ooneemetoos with another man: “what would dad say? [...] Sick. That’s what he’d call [it]” (208). In this way, he does not believe that Dancer is acting out of his own free will but that he is being tempted by the Weetigo and forced to behave in such a way because of its tight grasp on him. He cannot see that Ooneemetoos’s actions come from the Trickster and not from the cannibalistic spirit.

Dancer Okimasis does not embody the Weetigo with its dark passions and sinful actions, but rather the Trickster. Ooneemetoos is the very last stage of the Trauma Recovery path; he has already been able to tell his story to his community through pow-wows and meetings with other aboriginal people and has found solace and safety within this small group of people. The fact that he acts on his passions and has sex with other men does not mean that he is just reliving his trauma, but that he was able to build himself from the pain that was inflicted upon him and managed to take all the things that made up his identity, torn and worn as they were, to create a new identity, a new reality for himself, where nothing would be left behind. He acknowledged that he was hurt and that what happened to them was horrible, as evidenced by his loud spoken hatred for Catholic religion and

Canadian culture, but he is also able to move away from his own pain in order to heal and look at the better picture:

“Are you... scared? That I might die?”

Jeremiah blinked. What should he say? Yes? No? Sometimes? Finally, he pulled his eyes away, threw his hands up to his mouth, and cried; yes, he was scared. He was scared shitless that was about to lose his brother.

“Katha mato<sup>2</sup>,” said Gabriel softly. “Please?”

“I...I promised Mom and Dad I’d take care of you. And I fucked it up. Fucked it up completely.”

“Remember that day the caribou almost ran us over?” Gabriel smiled. “And you dragged me up that rock? Saved my life. But I’m not a child any more, Jeremiah. Haven’t been for a long time. There is nothing you could have done about this. What I did, I did on my own. Don’t mound me. Be joyful.”<sup>3</sup> (300-301)

In this manner, both the name given to him by the church, Gabriel, and the name given to him by his parents, Dancer, join in order to create his new identity, in which he can dance to heal but also to give others a space to heal through him. He is the bringer of good news, but not in the way that the archangel was, because he brings hope and a voice to those who had all but lost hope. Gabriel becomes the Trickster for his brother, even if he cannot see it at first, because it is he who manages to bring Champion back out from his shell, who gets him to acknowledge his trauma and who gives him a voice. As Highway expresses in his interview with Hodgson,

For me, the novel is like a new instrument, and the act of writing has become a form of prayer, the only form of prayer. This novel is like a grand piano that Jeremiah the pianist

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<sup>2</sup> *Don't Cry*

<sup>3</sup> Allegedly, Rene Highway's parting words to his brother Tomson.

receives from his brother, Gabriel, at the end of his life. Jeremiah plays his sonata on the grand piano, and his younger brother dances. (Emphasis mine, Hodgson, nd)

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* is a story about love and reunion; a reconciliation not only with others but also with one self, something that Ooneemetoogave to his brother like a grand piano that would enable him to keep playing, keep on living, as he danced his life away.

Although the existing criticism about this novel tends to focus on Dancer's homosexuality as a way of showing how Ooneemetoog does not cope with his trauma, this paper focuses on something far more subtle and delicate: his gender identity. Because of Dancer's identification with the Trickster, and the words Highway shares with the reader in the preface, I believe that we cannot speak about Ooneemetoog in terms of the gender binary (he/she) because Dancer's story transcends that of the other characters and turns him into a symbol almost beyond our understanding. Highway states that there is no gender binary in Cree but there is in English, which hinders our understanding of the world he is trying to portray, the one Ooneemetoog invites us to see with his words and story.

As Highway explains, in English, unlike Cree, gender cannot be omitted when referring to a person: one is either a she or a he; only now social movements are trying to push away the gender binary to have a more open and accepting society. According to Sue-Ellen Jacobs in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (1997) "we use the term gender to refer specifically to cultural rules, ideologies, and expected behaviors for individuals of diverse phenotypes and psychological characteristics" (2). Jacobs explains that a Gender Identity refers to the possible identities people can have within their cultures and that Sex refers to biological phenotypes and Sexuality for sexual behaviors (2). Moreover, Jacobs explains that these Gender Identities are different for every culture. While western society might only have a gender binary, there are other



cultures such as Native Americans who have a variety of gender identities and codes not defined by sex.

Gender has since evolved and can be understood on three different grounds: 1) gender biology, which corresponds with what Jacobs defined as Sex, 2) gender expression, the manner in which people dress and act to denote their gender in their culture, and 3) gender identity, which instead of referring to the set possibilities of identity and expression in a culture refers to the actual identity in people's minds. Perhaps the easiest dimension to understand in gender is the first one, which only pertains to the bodies in which we are born, no additives, just that. Where things begin to get complicated is when two or more of these dimensions begin to clash with one another, as in having masculine gender biology but a feminine gender expression, or a feminine gender biology with a neutral gender identity and a fluid gender expression. All these variants are the reason why the gender binary is becoming more and more problematic, and why terms such as gender-queer and Non-binary were coined. A Gender-queer person is whoever falls into a non-normative Gender Identity and Gender Expression, without having to specify exactly into what variant of the gender spectrum they fall.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* edited by Jodi O'Brien (2009) there is a relatively new term that can be used to talk about non-normative people: Gender Queer, encompasses people who "understand themselves in ways that challenge binary constructions of gender and traditional images of transgender individuals" (370), and it is most commonly used by young, nonconforming people who are more comfortable blurring and transgressing the lines made up by society, and who hope that their gender identities will become more visible and accepted in time.

Gender Queer people, unlike transgender individuals, do not feel comfortable within the gender binary and feel most comfortable within the grey zones of what is female and male. Thus, Gender Queer people are not ‘women trapped in men bodies’ or the other way around, but people who may sometimes feel female, sometimes male, sometimes neither or an amalgamation of both, and their gender expression –the way in which they act and dress- varies accordingly to their inner identities. *The Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies* edited by Abbie E. Goldberg (2016) goes on to explain that the term Gender Queer is not very well understood by Western cultures and that it is used to describe three gender identity categories “(1) an individual who feels their identity falls in between male and female, (2) an individual who may feel male or female at distinct times, or (3) an individual who rejects gender completely” (460). A list of names for each of the categories is listed as well, but since the names are constantly changing, as they should, because language serves the people and not the other way around, they are only given as examples. For the first category of Gender Queers the words Gender Variant, Gender Fluid and Pangender are given as an example, for the second category there is Bi-gender, and for the third category the terms Agender and Neutrois are used.

In the case of Ooneemeetoo, because of his portrayal as the Wesageechak, I believe him to be between the Gender Fluid or Agender spectrum, since Dancer Okimasis is neither one nor the other, but both at the same time and able to interchange them at will. Taking this into consideration it would be more appropriate to say they<sup>4</sup> fall into the spectrum of a Gender Fluid individual, however, their final words would contradict this notion. Ooneemeetoo’s questioning of “Who do you think met Dad? On... the other side? [...] Jesus or Wesageechak?” is a final confirmation of their identity, perhaps not for themselves but for their brother Champion. When Ooneemeetoo answers their own question with

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<sup>4</sup> “They” is being used as a gender-neutral pronoun, not to denote plurality.

The Trickster, or course [...] Wesageechak for sure. The clown who bridges humanity and God – a God who laughs, a God who’s here, not for guilt, but for a good time. Except, this time, the Trickster representing God as a woman, a goddess in fur. Like in this picture. I’ve always thought that, ever since we were little kids. I mean, if Native languages have no gender, then why should we? And why, for that matter, should God? (Kiss of the Fur Queen 298)

They are not only reassuring Champion that their father had been welcomed by the Trickster despite all the things he had and hadn’t done, or that both of them would also be welcomed with open arms despite everything that happened to them, but Dancer is also trying to settle down the argument about their identity and the choices they have made along the way. Champion often questions his brother’s choices and lifestyle, and so Ooneemetoos chooses these final words to part with the knowledge that the discussion is pointless, gender is pointless, he does not understand why they have to try to conform to a society that not even once tries to welcome them. By embracing a gender queer perspective Ooneemetoos is not only claiming a new identity but also returning to the language that had been stripped away from both brothers.

The dedication at the beginning of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* shows how close to the author’s heart the novel is, since it is one of the few things that Tomson did not provide a translation for at the end of the novel. Heather Hodgson explains in ‘Survival Cree, or Wesageechak Dances Down Yonge Street – Heather Hodgson Speaks with Tomson Highway’ (nd) that “In Cree, the dedication [of the book] reads: *Igwani igoosi, n’sseemis*. This means, roughly, *for you, little brother*. How much love and loss are packed into that little phrase!”, and that as it happens when translating Cree to English something essential is lost. Furthermore, Hodgson regrets not being able to understand the pain and loss that Tomson, and Cree speakers, feel upon reading these words because he does not share their dialect. Because of this, the novel remains deeply rooted in Cree culture and creates a small space in

which Cree people can see their culture reflected, in a way that while it can be shared by outsiders, it cannot be felt in the same manner that people who have gone through these happenings do. It is my belief that with his novel *Highway* not only provides something for the general public to experiment but also something for those who have gone through circumstances similar to the ones depicted in the book, something that through the reading of the novel remains untainted, and theirs.

While the topic of the residential schools and colonization of native lands in Canada is inherently painful and seen as horrifying, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* manages to defy the canon by delivering a tale about success and overcoming one's fears and traumas by embracing the native culture and the community. By having Ooneemeetoo bring back the tale of the Fur Queen and by having them<sup>5</sup> reunite with the Trickster instead of Champion, the tale gains a cyclical characteristic that brings back the energy from the beginning of the novel.

The novel is not trying to polarize the characters or set them apart from each other, but on the contrary, is allowing them to drift away for a moment, grow, flourish and then re-encounter so that they both can learn from each other. Champion's refusal to see and understand pushed Ooneemeetoo to try harder to explain and express, and Ooneemeetoo's deep feeling of things is what ultimately enabled Champion to open his eyes and return to his culture. In the final instances, not only does Dancer make a statement of who he is beyond what life has dealt him but also Champion is able to go back to his roots, the culture that saw him race through the woods and then burst into life with vibrant music and sound. The identities of the brothers are then very closely intertwined since throughout the story they aid each other, in varying ways, to forge their identities. While Champion provides an example of what would have happened if Ooneemeetoo had given

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<sup>5</sup> "Them" is being used as a gender neutral pronoun, not to mark plurality.

into denial, Dancer shows Champion the way back into a culture with no labels. Dancer proves to him that he did not have to second guess himself and that music could be its own language.

The end of the novel is not only a claiming of identity, or a denouncement of western culture, but also an invitation to go back to the beginning of the story with this new knowledge. Ooneemeetoo's final words and the narration at the end give us new pieces of information on how the book could be read and the stories that are hidden inside of it. While the novel ends with the death of a character, the invitation not to mourn but be joyful instead and the final wink of the fur queen open the gates to a new beginning, a new life, a new hope, maybe not for the characters but for those reading the novel. The ending brings out the possibility of a new reading of the story in which the underlying tale of hope becomes more apparent and encompasses the rest of the novel and characters. Thus, Ooneemeetoo's story stops being background noise and instead bursts into life with bright colors and vibrant movement.

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