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## Coeval Worlds, Alter/Native Words: Healing in the Inuit Arctic

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### Introduction

*Split Tooth* (2018) is the debut novel of Inuk throat singer and artist Tanya Tagaq. As a narrative that addresses colonial traumas in the peripheries of what is known today as the settler-colonial state of Canada, the novel stands out notably for its plasticity in terms of form, style, and aesthetic techniques. It brings together prose, poetry, illustrations, narrative registers that are anchored in Inuit ontologies, epistemologies, and worldviews along with Tagaq's own memoir. Together, the novel is described by Tagaq as "non-fiction, embellished non-fiction and pure fiction" (qtd. in Doherty). Indeed, there is no indication of when the fiction ends and the non-fiction memoir begins (nor vice-versa), "underscor[ing] the inability of those binaries of Euro-defined disciplines to categorize, embrace, or discipline the exciting work of Indigenous artists and scholars" (Beard 317). By not conforming to those western literary genres of realism, fantasy, or science fiction, nor to experimental literary categories of magical realism, speculative fiction, and imaginative literature, *Split Tooth* presents itself as what Cherokee scholar and writer Daniel Heath Justice terms "Indigenous Wonderworks." In his landmark study of Indigenous literatures *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), Justice opens with an introduction titled "Stories That Wound, Stories That Heal" (1). He explains that, although many toxic stories were written about Indigenous peoples—especially from a colonial Eurocentric perspective—the most damaging of them all is that of "*Indigenous deficiency*" (2, original emphasis).

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According to this story, Justice explains, lack in all its forms is inherent to Indigenous peoples' nature, whether it is a lack of "morals, laws, culture [...] language [...] a lack of responsibility" towards themselves and their families—a lack that this story attributes to Indigenous biological, intellectual, and psychological deficiency (2). Besides, Justice states, this story asserts that lower rates of life expectancy, employment, and education, along with higher rates of homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide are due to the Indigenous "lack of human decency" rather than a consequence of longstanding colonial violations of Indigenous people's lives, cultures, and identities (3). Mental health issues related to trauma, depression, and despair, according to this story, find genesis in the Indigenous peoples' "lack of mental fitness" rather than being sustained by ongoing colonial oppressive and racist social structures (3). Justice asserts that the story of "Indigenous deficiency works as a protective shell hiding "settler colonial guilt and shame" while simultaneously exonerating society from taking "responsibility for the story's devastating effects" (4). In the introduction of *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains that (post-)colonial and settler-colonial governments, states, institutions, and societies continue to ignore the "historical formations" of degrading conditions imposed upon Indigenous peoples' such as poverty, physical and mental health issues, alcoholism, and substance abuse that are direct results of colonialism as well as socio-political and economical marginalisation and oppression (34). Instead, these institutions place the blame on Indigenous peoples, trying to convince them that there is an inherent deficiency within them that explains their "worthlessness, laziness, dependence and lack of 'higher' order human qualities" (34). These are, indeed, part of the "Stories That Wound" to which Justice refers in the title of his introduction.

However, Justice also insists that there are other stories, which he refers to as "Stories That Heal." Written from Indigenous perspectives, these bring about

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spiritual and bodily healing by reminding Indigenous people that they are not “determined by the colonial narrative of deficiency” that have been long internalised and accepted as fatal truth (5). The author explains that these stories are found in Indigenous literacies, yet they should not be understood simply as “diverse literary forms” or looked at from a narrow aesthetic prism, for “they perform other kinds of vital functions in their respective cultures, many of them ceremonial, ritual, and spiritual” (23). Justice asserts that Indigenous “speculative” literatures carry within them these “Stories That Heal.” In fact, he explains that Indigenous speculative literatures provide “transformative modes” which, through a “complementary and distinctive range of reading and interpretive strategies,” make it possible to dismantle the monolithic and fatalist “models of ‘the real’” and provide transformative visions of other lives, experiences, and histories” (142). Therefore, Justice avers that the “ethical import” provided by speculative fiction—whether fantasy, horror, or science fiction—demands to be looked at critically and pedagogically (142). He maintains that within Indigenous speculative fiction, “the fantastic is an extension of the possible, not the impossible; it opens up and expands the range of options for Indigenous characters (and readers); it challenges our assumptions and expectations of ‘the real,’ thus complicating and undermining the dominant and often domineering functions of the deficit model [of the real]” (149).

However, Justice questions the relevance of the terminology that informs speculative fiction when it is viewed from Indigenous cultural and literary perspectives. He takes issue with terms such as “fantasy fiction” or “speculative/imaginative literature” as they are “burdened by dualistic presumptions of real and unreal” and “leave [no] legitimate space for other meaningful ways of experiencing this and other worlds” (152). Even more problematic for Indigenous cultures and literatures, explains Justice, is that the term

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"fantasy" suggests a kind of fabrication which, if understood from a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective, could suggest a pathology of neurosis and delusion (152–3). Instead, he proposes the concept of "wonderworks" that implies a polythetic understanding of the world and reality (152). Justice explains that "[w]ondrous things are *other* and *otherwise*; they're outside the bounds of the everyday and mundane [...]. "They remind us that other worlds exist; other realities abide alongside and within our own" (153, original italics). Indigenous wonderworks are grounded in Indigenous peoples' cultural specificities and experiences, allowing for the resurgence and the recovery of Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and politics that have long been dismissed by colonial discourses and narratives (154). Furthermore, per Justice, Indigenous wonderworks subvert the "expectations of rational materialism" that insist on the inevitability and fatality of "the oppressive structures and conditions" as inherent to Indigenous experiences (154–5).

This article examines the ways in which *Split Tooth* revisits various sites of colonial and neo-colonial traumas that the Inuit endured and still endure in the Arctic region of what is known today as Canada. The novel provides a vigorous critique of colonial capitalist modernity and its destructive "development" from which the Inuit suffer, with a particular focus on the ecological disasters provoked by resource extraction and global warming brought about by global capitalism and Canadian capitalist expansionism in the Arctic region. In doing so, *Split Tooth* highlights the ways in which environmental disasters and their anthropogenic effects find geneses in colonialism's ecocidal logics. In fact, this is precisely what is argued by settler-Canadian scholar Heather Davis and Métis Anthropologist Zoe Todd in "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene" (2017). In their article, Davis and Todd call for a re-evaluation of the start date of the Anthropocene by linking it to western colonisation and approaching it as a continuation and accumulation of colonial dispossessions, genocides, and ecocides (761). The

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authors explain that the logic of the Anthropocene resides in “the ruptures and cleavages between land and flesh, story and law, human and more-than-human” caused by colonialism and contemporary petrocapiatalism (775).

Davis and Todd’s parallel between the start of the Anthropocene and the beginning of western colonialism of “the Americas” suggests that Indigenous peoples are well acquainted with its repercussions. In *Split Tooth*, the relationship between colonialism and Canadian petrocapiatalism, and environmental destruction in the Arctic region is aesthetically registered not only through a panoply of narrative registers in which non-human agencies that pertain to Inuit worldviews and knowledge systems are mobilised, but also through a subversive appropriation of the Gothic and phantasmagoria. In parallel, aspects of the western Gothic are deployed as a subversive strategy to capture the protagonist’s trauma of sexual abuse and rape that is implicitly equated with colonial encroachment and environmental destruction in the Arctic. Reflecting on the land’s agency and ability to exert an influence of human and the other-than-human beings in “Indigenous Place-thought & Agency amongst Humans and Non-humans” (2013), Vanessa Watts writes: “Our truth, not only Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee people but in a majority of Indigenous societies, conceives that we (humans) are made from the land; our flesh is literally an extension of soil” (27). This conceptualisation, which Watts calls “Place-Thought,” is “based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (21). In *Split Tooth*, the protagonist inscribes her path of healing within the worldviews and knowledge systems that inform the Inuit perspectives and visions of the natural environment and landscape of the Arctic. As such, the power of Tanya Tagaq’s novel lies in the way in which it presents itself as a narrative of healing and survivance.

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In the context of colonial traumas, survivance is, as Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor puts it, neither mere survival, nor endurance and passive presence; rather, "survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy and victimry" (*Fugitive Poses* 15). In a recent article by Valerie N. Wieskamp & Cortney Smith, entitled "'What to do when you're raped'" (2020), the authors conduct a rhetorical analysis of Lucy M. Bonner's illustrated handbook *What to Do When You are Raped* (2016). In it, they explore the potential of the "rhetoric of survivance" in expanding the discussion about trauma and sexual violence within Indigenous women and girls (73). Wieskamp and Smith start with a critique of the Euro-American discourses of trauma and sexual violence that they consider incompatible with the experiences of women of colour (73). In addition to their racial and gendered tendencies, they explain, Euro-American discourses of trauma follow a linear "traumatological timeline" which assumes a stable subject position before traumatising. Thus, traumatised individuals are capable "of being forever cured of that trauma, even if they cannot regain their initial subject position" (76). This understanding, the authors contend, victimises those who fail to detach themselves from their trauma (76). Moreover, Wieskamp and Smith state that Euro-American conceptions of trauma and healing are highly individualistic, such that the accountability of the state's structural oppression is hidden via grammars of psychology and individual well-being (73). In *Split Tooth*, the narrator is not trapped in a traumatic compulsion. Nor does she accept the status of a passive survivor of her trauma in which healing and recovery are, as Deborah L. Madsen points out, equated with a therapeutic re-assimilation or reintegration of the fragmented self that aims to bring the patient "to a condition of cultural productivity," and in which "the concept of psychic integration or assimilation" is imperatively conflated with social assimilation ("On Subjectivity and Survivance" 64).

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As such, the novel can be read in terms of what Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard calls, in *Red Skins, White Masks* (2014), a rejection of the colonial politics of recognition (17). In this study, Coulthard draws on Fanon's critique of the colonial politics of recognition to investigate the current situation of Indigenous-settler state relations in Canada (17). The author explains that Fanon's critique of the colonial politics of recognition consists of two dimensions. The first dimension presents a structural problem that lies at the heart of colonial recognition as it occurs in "in real world contexts of domination" such that "the terms of accommodation" concerning this recognition are regulated and shaped "by and in the interests of the hegemonic partner in the relationship" (17). The second dimension, he adds, presents a subjective problem that consists of the colonised people's psychological and affective attachment to "structurally circumscribed modes of recognition" that facilitate and perpetuate "the economic and political structure of colonial relationships over time" (1718). In *Split Tooth*, the protagonist resists pathologisation and victimisation while simultaneously rejecting assimilation by asserting her self-determination through her historical consciousness, political agency, and cultural affirmation. In this way, the novel manifests what Coulthard calls a "*resurgent politics of recognition*" which he conceives as a decolonial praxis that focuses on Indigenous self-empowerment "through cultural practices of individual and collective self-fashioning" (18, original italics). As an Indigenous wonderwork, not only does *Split Tooth* reflect Indigenous perspectives on the world, reality, and existence, it also offers a decolonising reading of healing that is articulated as an ongoing process of survivance entrenched within the natural environment of the Arctic. Therefore, the novel presents itself as what Justice calls a story that heals.

### **Traumatised Land, Traumatised Bodies**

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*Split Tooth* is set in a small, peripheral town in the Arctic region of Nunavut, situated in the northern territories of what is known today as Canada. The peripherality of the town is not limited to its geographic location in relation to the core-capitalist metropolises of the settler-colonial state of Canada. Indeed, through a myriad of narrative registers, such as non-human agencies, Indigenous Inuit narrative registers and storytelling, free-verse poetry, and scientific terminologies of geology, the author formally and aesthetically registers the town's peripherality in a logic of an uneven and traumatic modernity produced by the expansion of Canadian colonial capitalism. The plot of *Split Tooth* is told entirely from the first-person perspective of an unnamed adolescent girl and is centred on her life in a coming-of-age narrative through which she confronts the trauma of longstanding sexual abuse. From the first page of the novel, this unnamed narrator provides an overview of the economical precariousness that haunts this peripheral arctic town. Amid this harsh arctic environment, she describes the house she lives in as made of "[f]ake-wood panel walls" (1, emphasis added). Although short as a description, it is possible to discern the critique that lies behind it. The fragility of the house walls speaks volumes about the uneven modernity produced in the logic of colonial and neo-colonial capitalism in Canada. In *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015), the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) reflect on the uneven nature of development and modernity brought about by capitalism in the (semi-) peripheries of core-capitalist countries. They contend that modernity in an economic logic of a combined and uneven development "is coded into the fabric of built space[s]" (148). In the novel, the fallacious character of the walls being made of "fake-wood panels"—instead of real wood which, as a natural resource, is hardly lacking in settler-colonial countries like Canada—provides a glimpse into the uneven distribution of wealth and the nature of development that a racially inscribed capitalism entails in the peripheries of these core-capitalistic settler-colonial countries

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Tagaq depicts the tormented life of an Inuit child whose community is still plagued by longstanding colonial and neo-colonial traumas and their far-reaching psychological, social and economic repercussions. However, the novel focuses more on the traumatic impacts of the Canadian residential school policies among Indigenous Inuit communities, shedding light on the social ills of alcoholism, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and suicide among the youth. Indeed, Tagaq dedicates her novel "*[f]or the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and survivors of residential schools*" (*Split Tooth* VII, original italics). Early in the novel, this traumatic environment, fuelled with alcohol and violence, is portrayed as the narrator's everyday life. The opening sentence reads: "Sometimes we would hide in the closet when the drunks came home from the bar. [...] Sometimes there was only thumping, screaming, moans, laughter" (1). From childhood, the narrator is exposed to persistent molestation and sexual abuse, both in public and domestic spaces. During a routine day at school, she describes "[t]he teacher squirming his fingers under my panties. / [...] He looks around and pretends he's not doing it" (*Split Tooth* 4). Later, speaking of the school custodian, she declares: "Watch out for the old walrus. / The old man likes to touch young pussy. / [...] *I wonder why nobody kicks him out*" (4, emphasis added). In this way, the novel's first poem exposes the educational environment that, ordinarily, is meant to offer security and fulfilment for children. Yet, located in a peripheral town of a settler-colonial country infested by uneven-race relations, the school becomes another space where Inuit children encounter institutionally facilitated oppression and abuse that the rhetorical question illuminates.

Tagaq's critique of colonial capitalist modernity and the destructive "development" endured by the Inuit of "Canada" takes on other proportions when she addresses the ecological disasters provoked by resource extraction and global warming brought about by global capitalism and Canadian capitalist expansionism

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in the arctic region. The novel highlights the ways in which environmental disasters and their anthropogenic effects find genesis in colonialism's ecocidal logics. In "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene" (2017), Davis and Todd contend that relating the Anthropocene to the beginning of colonialism allows it to be set as a critical project through which it is possible to consider today's "ecocidal logics" not as fatality or as something inherent to "human nature," but rather as the outcome of a constellation of attitudes that "have their origins and reverberations in colonization" (763). By linking the Anthropocene to colonialism, they demonstrate the way in which the emergence of ecological disaster is inherently tied to a western ideology that not only separates but also places the human above "geology and biota" (769). Indeed, Davis and Todd argue that colonialism and settler-colonialism "[were] always about changing the land, transforming the earth itself, including the creatures, the plants, the soil composition and the atmosphere. It was about moving and unearthing rocks and minerals. All of these acts were intimately tied to the project of erasure that is the imperative of settler colonialism" (770). The logic of the Anthropocene, they assert, resides in colonialism and contemporary petrocapiatalism's severing of the bonds between "humans and the soil, between plants and animals, between minerals and our bones" (770). By relating the Anthropocene to colonialism, Davis and Todd concretely ground the concept in the current ecological and environmental crisis.

As an Indigenous wonderwork, *Split Tooth* captures the violence and the ecological impact of oil extraction in Nunavut through a mixture of phantasmagoria and anthropomorphism. Early in the novel, the narrator anthropomorphises "[g]lobal warming" through the use of active verbs, asserting that it "will release the deeper smells" and "coax stories out of the permafrost" (*Split Tooth* 6). Later, in an ominous phantasmagorical tone, she wonders "what memories lie deep in the ice? Who knows what curses?" (6). Addressing such issues in their work, the WReC

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contributors argue that in literary works that register ecological failures induced by violent resource extractions, there is often a self-conscious recourse to—and appropriation of—“catachrestic narrative devices,” fantastic tropes, and aesthetics of speculative fiction in order to “visualise spectral economies of oil and energy, hyper-commodity fetishism” and “to register the violent impact of petroleum extraction and reorganisation of socio-ecological relations” (*Combined and Uneven* 97–8). In the novel, the use of western aspects of phantasmagoria and the Gothic to register the destructive impact of global warming can be read as a subversive strategy whereby the author explicitly links the attacks on the arctic environment to colonialism in general, and to the Canadian neo-colonial policies of resource extraction in particular.

In other passages that touch upon the same theme, the narrator addresses the land directly. Yet, unlike “global warming,” which is gothicised and anthropomorphised, the land is approached as a character *per se* through a conferred agency that is reflected in the novel’s typography. In an interlude, the narrator enters in a direct conversation with the land as their gazes meet, “[b]lack eye on black eye” (64). She addresses the land as a human being with human organs using the second person pronoun “you” when she says: “Your mouth opens and emits a toothless scream” and “[y]our hair falls out” (65). This embodiment of the land reaches an apotheosis when the narrator corporealises the suffering it endures while being stripped of its oil resources. First, she compares it to bleeding and haemorrhaging when she describes the way in which “[o]il begins to seep from all of [the land’s] orifices” (65). Afterwards, she equates the process of well-drilling with the skinning of a caribou: “This is happening to you with invisible hands, and then the skin reattaches itself so you can feel that same thing again and again” (65). Finally, the narrator considers the land as a traumatised body to which “[d]eath” would be “a thousand times more desirable than this” and for which she “will

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always bear witness" (65). These passages register the stark differences that exist between Indigenous worldviews and western conceptions of space and the environment. Indeed, Smith argues that, for the west, space is regarded "as being static or divorced from time. This view generates ways of making sense of the world as a 'realm of stasis', well-defined, fixed and without politics" (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 109). She writes: "Land, for example, was viewed as something to be tamed and brought under control" (106). In fact, what is described in the above passages is precisely what Davis and Todd posit as the severed bonds between humans, other-than-humans, and the land caused by colonialism and later exacerbated by extractive capitalism.

As discussed above, the WReC contributors consider the mobilisation of fantastic tropes and speculative fiction aesthetics a deliberate and purposeful technique that endeavours to invoke the shock and violence entailed by "petro-modernity's blind dependence on oil and its unrelenting drive to expansion" (*Combined and Uneven* 109). Nevertheless, in the case of Indigenous wonderworks, the speculative and the fantastic are, as Justice puts it, "an extension of the possible, not the impossible" and, by extension, the real, not the unreal (149). He argues that such works depict "experiential realities" found in "most traditional Indigenous systems" that "don't always fit smoothly into the assumptions of Eurowestern materialism" (141–2). Being an Indigenous wonderwork, it would be inaccurate to consider the land's sentience in the novel as mere fantasy or fabrication because concepts of other-than-human personhood and agencies are inherent to those "experiential realities" of many Indigenous knowledge systems. The non-human agency with which the earth is endowed in *Split Tooth* is a deliberate technique on Tagaq's part to assert an Inuit perspective on the land and the environment, in which both are considered living beings with agency. In this way, Tagaq presents an acute critique of western colonisation's commodification of

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Indigenous space through the oil industry—a commodification that is symptomatic of the destructive modernity lived by the Inuit as a direct result of the Canadian colonial and expansionist capitalism.

As with the trauma of the land, the protagonist's trauma is predominantly captured through narrative registers that pertain to the western Gothic and is conveyed in episodic free-verse poems that predominantly ignore the novel's overall linearity. It is worth noting that throughout the passages that describe scenes of sexual abuse, whether in the poetic or prosaic parts of the novel, the perpetrator is never referred to by name. Commenting on this namelessness in her review of the novel, M. Jacqui Lambert notes that "it could serve as a true function of the reality within the story where the narrator prefers to play it safe, rather than naming her uncle, a parent's friend or another man within the small community" (Lambert). If, as mentioned above, Tagaq's novel does contain portions of her memoir, then Lambert's statement is plausible. However, what is at stake here is the aesthetic value and impact that is produced by this namelessness, particularly in a second untitled poem where the narrator spectralises the perpetrator as a reflection on the haunting impact of living under the constant horror of abuse. She writes:

Something is lurking [...]  
Something imperceptible  
Something unseen  
Something war-driven  
Something obscene. (*Split Tooth* 35)

Here, the narrator depicts the rapist as a malicious presence, a menacing demon or ghost capable of concealing himself to better hunt her down and attack at a propitious moment. The rhythm produced by the anaphoric verses strengthens this phantasmagorical portrayal, such that it textually and aesthetically reproduces and reflects the narrator's constant and anxious anticipation of abuse. Moreover, in a

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prosaic passage, she declares: "There are evil beings in the room near the ceiling waiting to take over the drunken bodies, Grudges and Frustrations slobbering at the chance to return to human form, to violate, to kill, to fornicate" (106). Here, the narrator spectralises drunkenness itself, comparing it to a demonic possession. The mobilisation of western gothic tropes in this Inuit literary text can, therefore, be read as a subversive strategy. On the one hand, it materialises Tagaq's endeavour to register a reality that, due to its extreme traumatic impact, cannot be embodied or grasped through a realist narrative register. On the other hand, doing so specifically by appropriating aspects of the western Gothic, she conceives the narrator's trauma and pain as, in one way or another, an aftermath of western colonialism, as well as the subsequent oppressive policies and the socio-political peripheralisation of the Inuit in the settler-colonial state of Canada.

Through references to human anatomy, as well as the intimacy of corporeality, Tagaq's *Split Tooth* captures the extent by which the deeply personal spaces of both the body and the home are violently intruded and encroached upon by the trauma of sexual abuse. Indeed, the use of spatiality—more precisely corporeal spatiality—is recurrent within the novel. Yet, in an untitled poem that captures another instance of rape, it is rather the *absence* of space that most profoundly registers that violence. The narrator states: "He keeps trying. / Pushing his hard thing. / Into a space that has no space" (22). The language of this poem furthers this corporeal violence by presenting the act of rape as an act through which a new, traumatic corporeal space is imposed upon the body. Indeed, the two mentions of the word "space" are not synonymous. In the first instance, it denotes a corporeal container, a space into which something can enter. In the second instance, however, "space" is both physiological and psychological; to possess "no space" during this moment is a violent image that registers not only the act of rape but specifically the rape of a child. Furthermore, it is a psychological construction

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that, due to the narrator's age and lack of sexual maturity, does not yet possess a referent. The infringement here, therefore, far exceeds the corporeal and threatens the "no space" that is, for the narrator, still an unknown space and which is, through this especially traumatic rape, instantaneously created and then destroyed.

Capturing the traumatic impact of her longstanding exposure to sexual abuse and violence in another poem, the narrator states: "I only work from the waist up / Psychological epidural [...] I was entered too young" (*Split Tooth* 41). These verses encapsulate the repercussions of the physiological and psychological intrusion and infringement discussed above and echoes precisely David Lloyd's definition of trauma as "violent intrusion and a sense of utter objectification that annihilates the person as subject or agent" ("Colonial Trauma" 214). Indeed, the impact of this traumatic intrusion is simultaneously physiological and psychological, both of which veer towards an annihilation of agency and subjectivity. On the one hand, by describing herself as someone whose lower body does not "work," the narrator seems to suggest a sense of dissociation, a loss of possession of that body part. On the other hand, this physical numbing is projected onto the psyche, conveyed here through the reference to an "epidural," a medical procedure entailing the administration of anaesthesia to numb the spinal nerves, usually deployed during childbirth. To use the metaphor of "epidural" here is, therefore, to denote an induced psychological numbness, registering the traumatic annihilation of the narrator's psychological agency and subjectivity, thus propelling her towards a path of substance abuse and, eventually, a suicide attempt.

### **Alter/Native Wor(l)ds of the Arctic:**

As delineated above, Davis and Todd's parallel between the start of the Anthropocene and the beginning of western colonisation of the "Americas" indicates that, far from being speculative, Indigenous peoples have already gone

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through its repercussions. Nevertheless, despite having faced countless anthropogenic scenarios that unfolded along with colonisation and extractive capitalism, Indigenous peoples, the authors assert, "contended with the end of their worlds, and continue to work to foster and tend to strong relationships to humans, other-than-humans, and land today" ("On the Importance of a Date" 773). In *Split Tooth*, it is precisely by striving to foster and tend to her relationships with other-than-human persons, and the natural environment of Arctic informed by Inuit worldviews and ways of knowing that the protagonist initiates her path of healing, and which takes the form of a journey of constructing and strengthening her psychological and sexual agency. This is articulated when, at a given moment during her adolescence, the narrator experiences a kind of astral projection during which her spirit leaves her body and is carried by the wind to the ocean shore, ending up a "large ice floe" that is "swept out to sea" by the shifting wind (92). As the water starts to heat up and the floe melts into small pieces, the narrator is "plunged into the water," stating that: "It is so cold that it burns. Treading water and feeling the life leave my body, I accept" (93). Suddenly, the small pieces that make up the ice floe morph into "miniature polar bears, dozens of them" and make "mewling noises" in an "indecipherable" language which the narrator understands as an attempt "to comfort [her]" (93). However, one of the small polar bears stands out. It grows and becomes massive, "his sphere of *reality* warming the ocean for [her]" (93, emphasis added). He gives her "his *corporeality*," she states, such that the ocean becomes "like a warm bath" (93, emphasis added). These passages reflect a multiplicity and fluidity of realities that are intrinsic to Inuit ways of knowing, captured here through what Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon calls in *Walking the Clouds* (2012) "Native Slipstream" (3). Dillon defines Native Slipstream as "a species of speculative fiction within the sf realm, [which] infuses stories with time travel, alternate realities and multiverses, and alternative histories" (3). In this way, the narrative concretises what Justice considers a multiplicity of forms and experiences

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of reality that “bleed into one another” (124). Indeed, not only does the reality of the polar bear reach out to the narrator’s, it does so through its “corporeality,” endowing her with one its natural attributes: the ability to endure the cold Arctic waters.

Nevertheless, the respective realities of the narrator and the polar bear do not simply interact; they merge into each other, becoming one. This fusion is articulated through an act of erotic communion; she declares:

I mount his back and ride him. [...] We are lovers. We are married.  
[...] He keeps me safe and I am drunk on his dignity. [...] My skin melts where there is contact with my lover. The ocean and our love fuse the polar bear and me. He is I, his skin is my skin. Our flesh grows together. [...] My whole body absorbs him and we become a new being. I am invincible. [...] I will live another year. (*Split Tooth* 93)

The polar bear, or Nanuq in the Inuktitut language, holds a special position in various Indigenous Inuit knowledge systems, regarded as a resilient and strong totemic ancestor, and often associated with hunting. In “Nanook, Super-Male” (1994), Bernard D’Anglure explains that, in “ancient times,” the boundaries between humans and animals were permeable with the polar bear as “the closest to man of all animals: when it metamorphosed it was recognizable by the size of its canine teeth and its pronounced liking for fat” (170). D’Anglure writes that, “according to our informants, ‘the bear is the ancestor of man and its flesh much resembles that of human beings in colour, texture and taste’. [...] It was said that the soul of a bear was very dangerous, that it should be treated like that of a kinsperson” (174). Accordingly, the above communion informs the novel’s assertion of “kinship with the other-than-human peoples” present in “most traditional Indigenous systems” and reflected in Indigenous wonderworks (Justice, 141).

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Nevertheless, the agency and subjectivity conferred on the bear—for he is presented as a character with whom the narrator has sexual intercourse that leads to their fusion into a "new being"—makes this passage a quintessence of the aesthetics of survivance. Among the neologisms that Vizenor presents in his works is the concept of "transmotion," an aesthetic strategy of Native survivance. In "The Unmissable" (2015), Vizenor explains that the prefix "trans" in transmotion "initiates a sense of action or change, a literary and unitary motion, and a wider concept of the motion in images and words" (64). As an aspect of survivance aesthetics that celebrates Indigenous ontologies, "transmotion" entails a representation of transformation that, according to Madsen, includes "the interchangeable transformations of the human into animal and animal into human" ("Tragic Wisdom and Survivance" 4). "Native transmotion," Vizenor writes, "is survivance, a reciprocal use of nature, not a monotheistic, territorial sovereignty. Native stories of survivance are the creases of transmotion and sovereignty" (*Fugitive Poses* 15). Tagaq's aesthetics of transmotion not only informs the natural motion of the narrator towards the ocean in a spiritual form, but also captures the transformation she undergoes after merging with the totemic animal. This fusion creates a "new being", after which the narrator acquires a sense of dignity and invincibility.

In *Split Tooth*, the narrator's journey of reclaiming her psychological and sexual agency culminates when, in physical form, she walks to the sea for a second time. Lying on the ice, her spirit "find[s] the smallest crack and slip[s] into the Arctic water below" (111). Now in spiritual form, the narrator explores the bottom of the Arctic water, which she describes as "a stadium event of Life" form which her "Spirit" drinks (112). Feeling her "Body" slipping away, the narrator travels back to the surface and regains possession of it: "It takes a monumental effort to wiggle my toes and open my eyes after the Exploration" (112). Interestingly, the words

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“Body,” “Spirit,” “Life,” and “Exploration” are capitalised in this passage, asserting the relationship that the Inuit have with life, corporeality, and spirituality. Indeed, Justice underlines the significance of such capitalisation in Indigenous literatures which, he contends, affirms the status of subjectivity and agency (6). This is expressed, for example, when the narrator declares that “Body give[s] Spirit permission to leave” and “Spirit moves through it [water] differently than Body does” (111). Here, the Body, the Spirit, and the Life of the narrator are characters in their own right, capable of exerting influence on the course of events. Accordingly, this expresses Tagaq’s assertion of an Inuit specificity, according to which the relationship to these aspects extends beyond the material and utilitarian—indeed, beyond mere possession and objectification.

This process of the separation and then reunion of body and spirit that the narrator calls “Exploration” triggers a crucial event in her journey of healing. As her body and spirit reunite, she declares:

The Northern Lights have descended upon me during my spirit journey. [...] Light leaves Time and takes on physical form. The light morphs into faces and creatures, and then they begin to solidify into violent shards. This energy is not benign like that of the ocean dwellers; these are the Masters of Law and Nature. (113)

Again, the capitalisation of “Northern Lights” and their designation as “Master of Law and Nation”—which are, in turn, also capitalised, is not innocuous. In Inuit worldviews, the phenomena of the Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis), known as “Arqsarniq” in Inuktitut, is believed to be the embodiment of the spirits of ancestors. In *Firebridge to Skyshore* (2009), Siobhan Logan explains that one of the most common traditional stories among the Inuit is that of the “realm of spirits” that could only be reached by the ravens and the dead (10). According to these stories, Logan adds, spirits of those who succeed to reach this realm are called “sky-

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dwellers." When the Northern Lights appear in the sky, these spirits are understood to be playing a football-like game using a walrus skull (10).

In *Split Tooth*, the narrator contrasts the "Northern Lights" with the "ocean-dwellers"—a reference to the polar bears—stating that the energy of the former is more powerful. In yet another erotic scene, she lets the "Lights" penetrate every orifice of her body and fill her womb. Afterwards, she declares:

I have felt renewed after the night on the ice. My tendons are thicker, my thoughts quicker. I am more capable. Fear is learning to run from me, not the other way around. I am not afraid anymore, as if meekness is slinking away into the deeper corners where it cannot dominate my psyche. The night with the Northern Lights changed my whole life. [...] This is where my lesson was learned: pain is to be expected, courage is to be welcomed. There is no choice but to endure. There is no other way than to renounce self-doubt. It is the time of Dawning in more ways than one. The sun can rise, and so can I. (121–2)

Similar to her sexual communion with the polar bear, the narrator's erotic encounter with the Northern Lights empowers her physically and, more importantly, psychologically. Yet, while the former is provisional and allows her to "live another year," the latter "changed [her] whole life" (93; 122). Indeed, not only does she rebuke fear, she also ironises it by appropriating its very quality of "fright." Here, "fear" is metaphorised and depicted as a sentient being that no longer possesses control over her psyche. Moreover, her interaction with what she calls "the Masters of Law and Nature" embodied by the Northern Lights instils traits in her psyche that had been annihilated by psychological and sexual trauma. Though she states that "pain is to be expected, courage is to be welcomed," the narrator asserts her resilience and resistance as an imperative to confronting the pain of her trauma

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(122). Through the capitalisation of the word “Dawning”—used here in its gerund form—the narrator parallels the quotidian victory of light over darkness. This is embodied by “the dawn,” with the need for an active and permanent sense of survival, resistance, and resilience in the face of the pain inflicted not only by a traumatised environment plagued by centuries of oppressive colonial policies and their far reaching traumatic impacts, but also by her own exposure to violent and cumulative sexual trauma.

Nonetheless, the narrator’s path to healing does not end here. The lesson that the Northern Lights want to teach her has only just begun. Soon after this night, the narrator notices that she does not menstruate and begins to feel a “flipping in [her] belly” (132). She states: “All I know is that I am not alone anymore; I am protected now. [...] I have the twins in my belly. I speak with the twins every day, a boy and a girl” (132–3). Strikingly, the spiritually conceived twins recall the divine conception of Jesus by the Virgin Mary, as recorded in Christian scriptures; yet the former subverts the latter in a number of ways. Unlike the biblical figure of Mary, the narrator’s pregnancy is the result of a consensual and welcomed sexual intercourse which empowers her both physically and psychologically. In addition, rather than a single male child, the narrator is expecting fraternal male-female twins, to whom she refers as her elders and not her children. She declares: “My elders are in my tummy. I *respect and admire* them. They know so much more than I do. [...] They are not my children but my equals and my leaders” (133, emphasis added). Moreover, the narrator asserts that she can “communicate freely” with them by “leav[ing] [her] consciousness and com[ing] to them into [their] *spirit world*” (133, emphasis added). This passage explicitly asserts an Indigenous Inuit vision of life and death and the unique understanding and conceptualisation of the relationship between the living and the dead.

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Indeed, the Northern Lights in Indigenous Inuit worldviews are the embodiment of ancestors and the spirits of the dead. As discussed above, one of the aesthetic qualities and specificities that Justice attributes to Indigenous wonderworks is their ability to register the flexible and permeable relationship between the realms of the living and the spiritual worlds. According to this vision, respect and veneration extend to the dead, for they are "ancestors with continuing relationships with the living" (Justice 124–6). In *Split Tooth*, it is precisely within this logic that the narrator's twins are presented; the narrator she considers them her elders and leaders, whom she respects and admires, for they have deeper and greater knowledge than she does. Indeed, the narrator is soon imbued with the knowledge the twins embody, allowing her to understand not only the nature of her pain and trauma, but also the nature of healing and the way in which it can be fulfilled. When the narrator gives birth to the twins, whom she names Savik and Naja, she describes Savik as "pointed, brooding" making people "cry in mourning or in grief" if they hold him in their hands for a long time (156). She states: "Savik eats up the agony, and seems to grow stronger when he bears witnesses to suffering. [...] Forcing out that agony leaves an open wound, it leaves people depleted. I notice that those who spend too much time with him grow ill and radiate a *grey pallor*" (156, emphasis added). Naja, on the other hand, is "bright," "calm and soft" with a voice that "heals anxiety" (158). Unlike her twin brother, Naja "inhales trouble and exhales solutions like a filtration system. She cleans people. [...] I saw her healing my mother's cold on a molecular level" (159). Accordingly, the narrator comes to understand that her twins represent pain and healing respectively, with the ability to affect her and her entourage.

Tagaq plays with the motif of colours to provide a material manifestation of trauma and healing in her novel. While Savik makes people sick and radiate that grey pallor, Naja "brings sheen to people's hair and glow to their cheeks" (163).

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After some time, the narrator notices that Savik grows bigger than Naja, realising that “[t]here must be an imbalance of pain in the world” (159). The repercussions of this imbalance begin to impact the people around her, starting with her uncle, an alcoholic, who slowly dies from liver failure. Indeed, Savik’s ability to inflict and bring out pain eventually targets the narrator herself. While breastfeeding, he bites his mother’s breast, “biting off the end of [her] nipple” (177). Here, the narrator notes that “there was no room for him on this earth” (177). She states: “I knew he would only grow stronger and his prey would not only be restricted to the old or sick, to the malevolent or weak. I knew his prey would become Love” (177). It is precisely this fear that forces the narrator to kill Savik by returning him to “the frozen ice” (180). Instead of dying, however, Savik transforms into a seal. In a violent scene of metamorphosis, his “neck hardens into a solid, boneless mass [...]. He builds a wall of protection around his heart [...]. My hands are burning, the bones in my hands are burning and there are a thousand boiling blisters where I am holding him. [...] he is mutating”, becoming a seal that then “flops into the crack in the ice” (181). Intertwined as they are, Savik’s contact with the Arctic waters impacts Naja as well, and she dies of hypothermia in her mother’s arms. Deciding to release Naja’s body into the water, the narrator finds that Savik “absorbs her flesh and they are one. She is he and he is she. Finally they are whole [...]. The seal looks up at me with love and hatred, death and life. It looks at me with the *Knowing*. Then the seal swims away” (181, emphasis added). Tagaq’s choice of the “seal” is not fortuitous. Kristen Borré explains in “The Healing Power of the Seal” (1994) that for many Inuit communities

Seals and seal hunting have intrinsic social value [...] seal maintains the physical, mental and spiritual health of the individual, the social well-being of the community, and confidence in Native power relations to maintain self-determination in the national and international world which is vested in the body politic. 1

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In the context of Tagaq's novel, the seal embodies that very same "physical, mental and spiritual health" to which Borré refers, and through which the novel grounds its processes of physical and psychological healing. Indeed, the seal *is* evidence of a healing that, the novel seems to be suggesting, is attainable only through a balance between pain and recovery. There is a lesson here to be learned—one which the Northern Lights intend to impart upon the narrator. If she had once believed that her healing is dependent on letting go of her pain, here she learns that this is impossible. There can be no healing without achieving the balance between Savik (who imparts pain and trauma) and Naja (who provides solace). Their union is, therefore, the novel's final aesthetic statement about the representation of a path of healing and survivance that is grounded in Inuit epistemologies, ontologies, and worldviews.

### **Conclusion / Introduction:**

The relationship between colonialism and Canadian petrocapi-talism, and environmental destruction in the Arctic region is aesthetically registered not only through a panoply of narrative registers in which non-human agencies that pertain to Inuit worldviews and knowledge systems are mobilised, but also through a subversive appropriation of the Gothic and phantasmagoria. In parallel, aspects of the western Gothic are also deployed as a subversive strategy to capture the protagonist's trauma of sexual abuse and rape that is implicitly equated with the colonial encroachment and environmental destruction in the Arctic. Yet, it is precisely within the worldviews and knowledge systems that inform Inuit perspectives and visions of the natural environment and landscape of the Arctic that the protagonist inscribes her path of healing. Indeed, in the second last poem of the novel, she states:

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I do not forgive and forget  
I Protect and Prevent  
Make them eat shame and repent  
I forgive me. (188)

By rejecting entrapment in a traumatic compulsion, while also resisting the victimising label of passive survivor of a traumatic history, the novel can be read in line with what Coulthard calls “Indigenous anticolonialism as a resurgent practice of cultural self-recognition” (*Red Skin, White Masks* 26). To explain this Indigenous anticolonial formulation, Coulthard draws on Fanon’s “theory of anticolonial agency and empowerment” in which personal and collective self-determination lie entirely within the colonised subject’s striving for their “freedom and self-worth” and working through their “alienation/subjection against the objectifying gaze and assimilative lure of colonial recognition” (43). Coulthard further explains this decolonising process, stating that the colonised subject must first acknowledge “*themselves as free, dignified, and distinct contributors to humanity*” (43, original italics). Central to this decolonising project, he explains, is the imperative of a personal and collective reconsideration of culture and identity that “could serve as a source of pride and empowerment” (43–4). In *Split Tooth*, it is precisely the empowering virtues of identity, culture, and, by extension, the land that allows the narrator to confront the trauma of rape and sexual abuse and derive her agency and her self-determination.

In addition, healing in the novel is not presented as linear and finite; rather, it is conceptualised as an ongoing process. This is reflected in the closing poem of the novel where the narrator declares: “Cleanse me. Wash the blood off. I am still working. I survive still. I am stronger now. / Worship me. I am boundless. I stood up. I am worthy. / *Start again*” (189, emphasis added). These closing lines reflect a need for a continuous survival, resistance, and self-determination to allow for an escape

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from the cyclical nature of trauma. In "'What to do when you're raped,'" Wieskamp and Smith explain that a rhetoric of survivance challenges the Euro-American linear temporality of trauma and its assumed traumatological timeline (80). Indeed, they state that, by resisting restriction to the past, present, or future, a rhetoric of survivance reflects what they call "infinite' temporality", which allows past, present, and future to flow together and "embraces the role of one's past to influence one's present and future" (81). As such, Wieskamp and Smith argue that survivance in the face of trauma conceives survival/resistance as an ongoing process that, in contrast to the Euro-American traumatological timeline, does not assume a "a trajectory towards brighter future, but presupposes surviving as a constant action" (81). In doing so, they assert, a rhetoric of survivance expresses an Indigenous "temporal sovereignty by rendering Native experiences visible and actionable" (81). In *Split Tooth*, it is precisely this non-linear and ongoing sense of healing that is formally and aesthetically registered in the novel, thus presenting itself as a narrative of survivance.

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