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ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

„Wonderworks“ v literatuře původních obyvatel Kanady na příkladu románu
Split Tooth od Tanyi Tagaq

Wonderworks in Canadian Indigenous Literature: The Case of Tanya Tagaq's
Split Tooth

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Abstract

This thesis explores the concept of “wonderwork,” as defined by Canadian writer and literary critic Daniel H. Justice, within the context of the novel *Split Tooth* (2018) by contemporary Inuit author Tanya Tagaq. Wonderwork, a genre offering a fresh perspective on Indigenous speculative fiction, blends reality and unreality, rejects colonial stereotypes, and envisions a future distinct from the settler-colonizer narrative. This study examines the specific characteristics of wonderworks and how they are reflected in Tagaq’s novel.

The analysis utilizes a decolonial framework that prioritizes Indigenous perspectives. By conducting a close reading of *Split Tooth*, supported by Justice’s theoretical writings and relevant scholarly sources on Indigenous and Inuit literature, this thesis demonstrates that the novel successfully exemplifies the genre of wonderwork.

Split Tooth combines prose, poetry, and visual elements to narrate the coming-of-age story of a girl in 1970s Nunavut, Canada. The novel merges “the real” and “the unreal” elements into a unified narrative. The protagonist’s interactions with natural and spiritual forces, such as the Northern Lights, mirror her experiences in the realistic setting of the Arctic region. This interplay reinforces the novel’s cohesive structure. By portraying complex characters and their relationships with their identity, spirituality and surroundings, *Split Tooth* rejects simplifying settler-colonizer narratives. Additionally, the novel examines the interdependence of healing and pain, suggesting that the cycle of violence sometimes must be broken through violence itself to achieve balance and remediation. This process leads to the possibility of imagining an empowered future. These characteristics demonstrate why *Split Tooth* is an example of wonderwork.

This analysis highlights the multifaceted role of wonderworks in challenging traditional boundaries between reality and imagination and shows how contemporary Indigenous literature opposes dominant narratives, as Justice suggests. Recognizing *Split Tooth* as a wonderwork significantly contributes to understanding Inuit literature and the decolonization of Canadian literary studies.

Keywords: Canadian literature, Indigenous literature, Inuit Literature, *Split Tooth*, wonderwork, speculative fiction

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá koncept „wonderwork“, jak jej definuje kanadský spisovatel a literární kritik Daniel H. Justice, v rámci románu *Split Tooth* (2018) od současné inuitské autorky Tanyi Tagaq. Žánr wonderwork nabízí nový pohled na spekulativní fikci původních obyvatel tím, že propojuje skutečnost s neskutečností, odmítá koloniální stereotypy a vykresluje budoucnost odlišnou od kolonizátorského narativu. Práce zkoumá specifické vlastnosti wonderwork a jejich vyobrazení v románu Tanyi Tagaq.

Analýza je zasazena v dekoloniálním rámci, který klade důraz na perspektivy původních obyvatel. Takzvané „close reading“ románu *Split Tooth*, podepřené teoretickými poznatky Justice a relevantními odbornými zdroji o indigenní a inuitské literatuře, ukazuje, že román úspěšně představuje žánr wonderwork.

Split Tooth propojuje prózu, poezii a ilustrace. Skrz rozličné formy vypráví příběh dospívající dívky v kanadském Nunavutu v 70. letech 20. století. Román prolíná prvky „skutečného“ a „neskutečného“ do jednotné reality. Hlavní hrdinka přichází do kontaktu s přírodními a duchovními silami, jako je například Polární Záře. Tyto interakce se zrcadlí v jejích zážitcích ve skutečném světě Arktidy, což posiluje soudržnost románu. Román také odmítá zjednodušené představy kolonizátorů tím, že zobrazuje komplexní postavy a jejich vztahy k vlastní identitě, spiritualitě a okolí. V neposlední řadě *Split Tooth* zkoumá propojení duševního uzdravování a bolesti a naznačuje, že koloběh násilí někdy musí být přerušen násilím samotným, aby bylo možné dosáhnout rovnováhy a nápravy. Tento proces vede k možnosti představení si odolnější budoucnosti. Tyto příklady ukazují, proč může být román *Split Tooth* považován za dílo wonderwork. Analýza zdůrazňuje mnohostrannou roli wonderwork při zpochybňování tradičních hranic mezi realitou a představivostí a ukazuje, jak současná literatura původních obyvatel může oponovat dominantním narativům tak, jak popisuje Justice. Chápání *Split Tooth* jako dílo z žánru wonderwork přispívá k porozumění inuitské literatury a k dekolonizaci kanadských literárních studií.

Klíčová slova: kanadská literatura, indigenní literatura, inuitská literatura, *Split Tooth*, wonderwork, fantastika

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Introduction

“I believe there are many more ‘Canadas’ out there: suppressed histories, silenced people, uncomfortable juxtapositions. Once you’ve discovered one, the others start to become more visible,”¹ says Warren Cariou, a writer and professor based in Winnipeg, adding that one of the methods to find *the other* Canadas is through reading.

Building on this insight, this bachelor thesis uncovers “the Canada” of Inuit literature, as depicted in the contemporary novel *Split Tooth* by Tanya Tagaq, a renowned singer, performer, and artist. *Split Tooth* is not merely a novel; it is a multi-dimensional work that intertwines prose, poetry, and visual art to depict the life of a young Inuit girl in Nunavut.

This thesis will analyze *Split Tooth* through the lenses of “wonderwork,” a literary genre defined by scholar Daniel H. Justice of the Cherokee Nation. Wonderworks offer a fresh perspective on Indigenous speculative fiction, centring Indigenous viewpoints and experiences while rejecting the dominant settler-colonizer narratives.

The central argument of this thesis is that *Split Tooth* exemplifies the genre of wonderwork through its fusion of myth and reality, disruption of stereotypical tropes, and its vision of a distinct and healed future. *Split Tooth* offers a powerful narrative that addresses themes of spirituality, abuse, and intergenerational trauma, as well as cultural continuity, resilience, and empowerment.

The thesis is organized into three main chapters. The first chapter introduces Inuit culture and literature, highlighting its oral-based tradition and tracing the evolution of the

¹ Warren Cariou, “Foreword, ‘Going to Canada,’” in *Across Cultures, Across Borders*, ed. Emma LaRocque, Paul W. DePasquale and Renate Eigenbrod (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2010): 23.

literary approaches towards it. The second chapter analyzes the concept of wonderworks and compares it with definitions of fantasy and magical realism. The third chapter discusses the individual elements in *Split Tooth* that justify its classification as a wonderwork. The conclusion examines the implications of recognizing *Split Tooth* as wonderwork and suggests directions for future research.

This analysis employs a close reading of Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth*, the primary source of the thesis, together with Daniel H. Justice's writings on wonderworks. Secondary sources encompass scholarly articles and books on both Indigenous literature in general and Inuit literature specifically. The research methodology also incorporates a decolonial framework to challenge dominant Western perspectives and prioritize Indigenous voices and epistemologies.

The importance of this research lies in its potential to deepen our understanding of the diversity found in the Canadian literary landscape. It underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing Inuit literature in the current era of Indigenous cultural resurgence.

To follow in the footsteps of the scholars this thesis builds upon, it is necessary to position the author before delving into the first chapter. Positioning oneself is the first step in "the responsible or ethical reading (...) if meant as an act of decolonization."² This thesis is written from the position of a non-Indigenous person studying Indigenous literature, fully acknowledging the privileges coming from a dominant cultural background, and limitations of lacking an insider perspective.

² Renate Eigenbrod, *Travelling Knowledges: Positioning the Im/migrant Reader of Aboriginal Literatures in Canada* (Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), 64.

The motivation to write this work aligns with the wordings of Helen Hoy, a Canadian professor researching Indigenous women writers: “From a position of race privilege, I feel a responsibility to combat structures of power and entitlement.”³ In recognizing these dynamics, this thesis commits to a respectful and critical engagement with Inuit literature, striving to analyze and amplify Indigenous voices within Canadian cultural studies.

³ Helen Hoy, “‘Introduction’ from *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada*,” in *Learn, Teach, Challenge*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 51, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/49036>.

1. Introduction to Inuit Literature

1.1 Inuit Population

Inuit are the Indigenous people of the Arctic region. The term “Inuit” comes from the language of the Inuit and can be translated as “the people.” The word is a plural form of “Inuk,” meaning “person.”⁴ Inuit populations live in Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Russia (specifically Chukotka).⁵

Inuit communities are spread across a large area, with the westernmost village more than 6,500 kilometres far away from the easternmost one, and the northernmost and southernmost communities separated by 3,000 kilometres.⁶ As a result, the Inuit language (sometimes generally referred to as “Inuktut”)⁷ has a number of regional varieties, with Inuktitut being the most spoken in Canada.⁸ A standardized version of the spoken variant of the Inuit language does not exist.⁹ However, in 2019, a new unified writing system called “the Inuktitut Qaliujaqpait” was introduced, becoming the first orthography conceived by the Inuit. This allows speakers of any dialect to write in the same way.¹⁰

In Canada, there are four Inuit regions: Inuvialuit (the northwest Arctic), Nunavut (the northernmost Arctic), Nunavik (the north of Quebec region) and Nunatsiavut (Labrador and Newfoundland).¹¹ In those regions the Inuit number almost 70,000

⁴ Keavy Martin, *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches To Inuit Literature*, (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 34.

⁵ “Inuit,” *Government of Canada*, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100014187/1534785248701#>.

⁶ Louis-Jacques Dorais, *The Language of the Inuit: Syntax, Semantics, and Society In the Arctic*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 7, <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/2027/heb33472.0001.001>.

⁷ “Inuit,” *Government of Canada*, accessed July 21, 2024, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100014187/1534785248701#>.

⁸ “Indigenous languages in Canada,” *Statistics Canada*, accessed July 21, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2023029-eng.htm>.

⁹ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, xii.

¹⁰ “Inuktitut Qaliujaqpait,” *Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami*, accessed July 20, 2024, <https://www.itk.ca/projects/inuktitut-qaliujaqpait>.

¹¹ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, xiv (map 2).

according to the latest 2021 census. Among the three officially recognized Indigenous Peoples in Canada (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit), Inuit represent the smallest group.¹²

In the discourse concerning the Indigenous people of the Arctic, there is also a significant dichotomy between “northerners” (people living in the Arctic region) and “southerners” (people living closer to the US borders, constituting the majority of the Canadian population).¹³ The idea of Inuit nationhood is influenced by the region Inuit live in. As the Arctic region is vast and harsh, Inuit people have struggled to be recognized as a unified nation with authentic history and politics.¹⁴ Though the Inuit were never centralized under one government, in 1977, representatives from Alaska, Canada and Greenland established a body representing all 180,000 Inuit – an organization called the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC).¹⁵ ICC states that although the borders of different states separate the nation, it is the “culture, environment and land and the wholeness of the homeland”¹⁶ that unites the people.

1.2 Oral Character of Inuit Culture

Another aspect that helps to highlight the unique Inuit identity is the oral tradition of songs and stories, which is common for various Inuit communities.¹⁷ The nature of Inuit culture is indeed oral; for example, storytelling is a crucial part of one’s upbringing. Stories are not only told for leisure but also serve as the medium through which beliefs, values, and practices are transmitted. Consequently, one story might have multiple versions, underlining different plot aspects, depending on the lesson being taught to the

¹² “Inuit,” *Government of Canada*, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100014187/1534785248701#>.

¹³ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 12–13.

¹⁴ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 12–13.

¹⁵ “United Voice of the Arctic,” *Inuit Circumpolar Council*, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com>.

¹⁶ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 13.

¹⁷ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 15.

child.¹⁸ Oral storytelling is an integral part of teaching and learning. Some stories are meant to warn children, amuse them, or encourage them in their lives. Lessons of resilience and character development are also found in the lyrics of Inuit “pihiit” (songs).¹⁹

In the 1890s, the Inuit adopted a syllabic writing system, which was perpetuated by the efforts of Christian missionaries.²⁰ Still, the idea of writing down stories or Inuit knowledge (called “Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit” or “what Inuit have always known to be true”) was met with distrust by Indigenous Elders. They believed the cultural practices and beliefs must be told and passed orally to new generations. That way the youngsters were stimulated to appreciate and remember the stories. The oral tradition facilitated communication between people, which was understood as a form of relationship. In comparison, Inuit Elders explained their dislike of writing because “[o]ne cannot have a relationship with someone who has written a book hundreds or thousands of miles away.”²¹

This approach towards orality differs significantly from the past views of non-Indigenous researchers. For example, in 1984, Canadian writer Robin McGrath published one of the first anthologies on Inuit literature. The author highlights the modern “transformation” from an oral-based culture to a written one which she sees happening throughout the 20th century. This transformation is described as “a normal and desirable

¹⁸ Joe Karetak and Frank Tester, “Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, Truth and Reconciliation,” in *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: What Inuit Have Always Known to Be True*, ed. Joe Karetak, Frank Tester and Shirley Tagalik (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2017): 4.

¹⁹ Mark Kalluak, “About Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit,” in *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: What Inuit Have Always Known to Be True*, ed. Joe Karetak, Frank Tester and Shirley Tagalik (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2017): 59.

²⁰ Robin McGrath, *Canadian Inuit Literature: The Development of a Tradition* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1984): 7, muse.jhu.edu/book/65566; Karetak and Tester, “Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit,” 17.

²¹ Karetak and Tester, “Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit,” 17.

development,”²² thus judging the oral art production only as a necessary presupposition for written literature that McGrath deems more valuable.²³ This opinion reflects the broader historical belief that writing was “the mark of a superior civilization,” demonstrating a society’s ability for critical thinking.²⁴

Moreover, traditional Inuit stories were historically studied by anthropologists rather than literary critics, which impacted how they were analyzed. Instead of gauging their literary merit, these stories were valued for depicting the life of Inuit society.²⁵ As Keavy Martin, an Indigenous literary scholar, sees it, art was “transformed into artefact.”²⁶ On similar grounds, McGrath’s anthology, though helpful in catalogizing the earliest pieces of Inuit literature, received criticism for taking a more anthropological than literary approach at times which revealed the author’s cultural prejudices.²⁷

However, the need to see the works of Indigenous culture as self-contained literary works was accentuated during the period of the “Aboriginal Renaissance” in Canada. This term reflects the flourishing of Indigenous arts in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.²⁸ It was also at this time that several periodicals started to be published, such as “Keewatin Echo,” a newspaper written in both English and Inuktitut, or “Inuktitut Magazine,” issued

²² McGrath, *Canadian Inuit Literature*, 24.

²³ McGrath, *Canadian Inuit Literature*, 12–26.

²⁴ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London: Zed Books, 2021), 32, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350225282>.

²⁵ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 41.

²⁶ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 41.

²⁷ Margaret Harry, “Literature in English by Native Canadians (Indians and Inuit),” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 10, no. 1 (1985): 147–8, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/8028>.

²⁸ Armand Garnet Ruffo, “Where the Voice Was Coming From,” in *Across Cultures, Across Borders*, ed. Emma LaRocque, Paul W. DePasquale and Renate Eigenbrod (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2010): 171.

by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, which created a platform for Inuit artists and politicians.²⁹

Since then, the understanding of what constitutes the subject of Indigenous literary studies has expanded. As acknowledged by contemporary artists, oral storytelling still plays a vital role within Indigenous communities. Warren Carriou, a Métis writer and professor, believes that oral stories are not “an occasion for a text,” nor something “to be recorded,”³⁰ mirroring the Elders’ opinions. According to Carriou, oral stories should be left to be exactly what they are supposed to be – being told without the need to be transformed into “a thing” such as a book or recording.³¹ Today, Indigenous literatures are defined very broadly – it may refer to written texts, as well as oral traditions, music, visual arts, and other creative expressions.³² One of the recurring topics that appear in both oral tradition and contemporary literature is the exploration of Inuit identity, often expressed by contrasting it with what it is not.³³

1.3 The Question of Indigeneity

The discussion of what literary forms should be included in Indigenous literary studies is closely tied to the question of what constitutes “Indigeneity” as such. Indigenous identity is a complex issue, and as Lakota professor Hilary N. Weaver reminds us, there is no clear consensus on its definition. Indigeneity is also not a one-dimensional trait. People’s identities are shaped by multiple characteristics, with culture being only one of many.

²⁹ Frank Tester, “Colonial Challenges and Recovery in the Eastern Arctic,” in *Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit: What Inuit Have Always Known to Be True*, ed. Joe Karetak, Frank Tester and Shirley Tagalik (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2017): 38.

³⁰ Aubrey Jean Hanson, “‘It comes back as a relationship’: A Conversation with Warren Carriou,” in *Literatures, Communities, and Learning: Conversations with Indigenous Writers* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2020), 77.

³¹ Hanson, “A Conversation with Warren Carriou,” 78.

³² Aubrey Jean Hanson, “Writing-In-Relation,” in *Literatures, Communities, and Learning: Conversations with Indigenous Writers* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2020), 12.

³³ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 16.

Others include race, class, education, region, religion, or gender. Furthermore, identity is not a permanent status; it shifts and changes over time, shaped by external and internal influences. To understand the topic of Indigeneity, Weaver suggests exploring three layers of identity: self-identification, community identification, and external identification.³⁴

The construction of “Indigeneity” emerged only after contact with the colonizers. Before that, Indigenous people defined themselves in relation to or against other Indigenous peoples, therefore without the need to see themselves or be seen as “Indigenous.”³⁵ Nowadays, umbrella terms such as “Natives,” “Indigenous Peoples,” or “First Peoples” are used for simplification.

However, Keavy Martin questions the need for this cohesion beyond the apparent usefulness in our understanding and the aesthetics of unity. “[W]hy does a monolithic tradition get more attention than a fragmented or minuscule one?”³⁶ Martin wonders, noting the tendency even within the Indigenous literatures. She mentions the broad category of “Inuit literature” despite the individual stories being very diverse and defined by the region in which they were created. Similarly, the umbrella term “Indigenous” comprises many peoples whose roots and experiences of being colonized vary.³⁷ Yet, if nations and even literatures are of considerable size or logically organized, they become too significant to be overlooked.³⁸ Asserting Indigeneity thus becomes a political stance, demonstrating a refusal of cultural assimilation.³⁹

³⁴ Hilary N. Weaver, “Indigenous Identity: What Is It, and Who Really Has It?” *American Indian Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2001): 240, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1185952>.

³⁵ Weaver, “Indigenous Identity,” 242.

³⁶ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 37.

³⁷ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 6.

³⁸ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 37.

³⁹ Weaver, “Indigenous Identity,” 244; Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 34.

Such an action is a manifestation of self-identification. Another layer of identity, internal identification, is connected to the community the Indigenous people live in. This layer of identity depends on shared traditions, language, common land, and ancestors. Historically, this part of identity within Indigenous communities has been jeopardized.⁴⁰ Many Indigenous people were forcefully separated from their communities. They were sent to residential schools, placed in foster care, or subjected to interracial adoption.⁴¹ The framework of internal identification is, therefore, not defined by the characteristics tied to tribal nationhood – ethnicity and blood quantum.⁴²

Additionally, external identification is shaped by the government. It is the government that decides which Indigenous peoples are to be recognized and which rights they will be granted.⁴³ However, this layer is the one Weaver openly disregards the most. She argues that it cannot be the role of others to assert one's identity.⁴⁴

1.4 Influential Voices in Inuit Literature

The written form of Inuktitut appeared less than 150 years ago, initially used primarily for religious ceremonies. This explains why the history of Inuit literature only begins in the second half of the 20th century.⁴⁵ Since then, Inuit literature has been shaped by several key figures who captured the experiences of the Inuit people and pushed the boundaries of literary expression.

⁴⁰ Weaver, "Indigenous Identity," 246.

⁴¹ Weaver, "Indigenous Identity," 247.

⁴² Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 19.

⁴³ Weaver, "Indigenous Identity," 246.

⁴⁴ Weaver, "Indigenous Identity," 248.

⁴⁵ Daniel Chartier, "The Social and Cultural Context of Inuit Literary History," in *Native America: Indigenous Self-Representation in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico*, ed. Jeanette Den Toonder, Kim van Dam and Fjære van der Stok (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016): 31–2, <https://archipel.uqam.ca/9525/1/222053319.pdf>.

One such figure is Mini Aodla Freeman, author of the autobiography *Life Among the Quallunaat* (1978). In this book, Freeman recounts her upbringing in the north and her life in Ottawa, where she worked for the Department of Northern Affairs.⁴⁶

An influential contemporary of hers was Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk, known for writing *Sanaaq* (1984), the first novel in Inuktitut. Nappaaluk's groundbreaking work consists of 48 episodes narrating the life of a young widow named Sanaaq, living in northern Quebec. Despite its significance, the book was not translated into English until 2014, four decades after its initial publication.⁴⁷

Another key contributor to Inuit literature was Alootook Ipellie, a poet, storyteller, filmmaker, and cartoonist. In his work, Ipellie often elaborates on the struggles of living between two worlds – the north and the south. His poem “Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border” captures this duality as he writes, “Trying my best to make sense / Of two opposing cultures / Which are unable to integrate.”⁴⁸

In addition to his poetry, Ipellie's work includes politically satirical cartoons criticizing the harmful consequences of colonialism. He bluntly expresses his political views through his art. For example, in his illustrated short story “After Brigitte Bardot” he explores cultural clashes between Indigenous people and southerners, drawing from a real-life experience. The story comments on a campaign, supported by the famous French actress Brigitte Bardot and targeted against seal hunts, vital for Inuit income.⁴⁹ “After

⁴⁶ Keavy Martin and Taqralik Partridge, “What Inuit Will Think,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*, ed. Cynthia Conchita Sugars (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 205, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴⁷ Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, “Foreword,” in *Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel*, by Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk (Manitoba, University of Manitoba Press: 2014), xi, EBSCO.

⁴⁸ Alootook Ipellie, “Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border,” *Poetry in Voice*, accessed July 2, 2024, <https://poetryinvoic.ca/read/poems/walking-both-sides-invisible-border>.

⁴⁹ Alootook Ipellie, *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* (Penticton, British Columbia: Theytus Books, 1993), 104–113.

Brigitte Bardot” is one of many stories in *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* (1993), his collection of short stories accompanied by pen ink drawings.

Ipellie was remarkable in the vast array of topics he explored in his art. He did not only examine his contemporary times, but he also looked back to Inuit legends and myths. He rewrote the myth of Sedna, the goddess of the sea and marine animals, told in many communities in different versions. Sedna was abused by her father and argued with him over her future marriage. Her father, enraged, threw her into the sea. Sedna attempted to get back to the boat they had been sailing on. However, her father cut her fingers off. Her fingers became the sea mammals, and Sedna became the goddess.⁵⁰ Ipellie takes the story further, showcasing the abilities of Indigenous storytellers who “re-invent and extend the traditions that they have inherited.”⁵¹ In his version called “Summit With Sedna, the Mother of Sea Beasts,” the Arctic suffers from a great famine. Sedna stops releasing sea animals, so the locals have nothing to hunt. The narrator is an Inuk shaman who works with other shamans to mend the situation. He finds out that Sedna’s moodiness is caused by her sexual dissatisfaction. She cannot experience pleasure because of the abuse she experienced as a young girl. The narrator sets on a journey with other shamans and their spirit helpers, and only in their collaboration do they manage to heal Sedna and restore balance in Arctic nature.⁵²

Further showcasing his versatility, Ipellie wrote a script for an animated short movie capturing a traditional Inuit story, “Owl and the Raven.” The tale narrates (both in Inuktitut and English) how the raven became black because of a conflict between the birds

⁵⁰ Alootook Ipellie, *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* (Penticton, British Columbia: Theytus Books, 1993), 34–42.

⁵¹ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 41.

⁵² Alootook Ipellie, *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares*, 34–42.

caused by the raven's impatience.⁵³ The movie conveys a multilayered moral story, sending a message about the importance of nurturing friendships, controlling temper, and the relationship with our appearance.

Among the new wave of influential Inuit writers are Norma Dunning, Taqralik Partridge, Aviaq Johnston and Tanya Tagaq. Norma Dunning's short story collection *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* (2017) explores the meaning of "Inukness."⁵⁴ Taqralik Partridge, born in Nunavik but now based in Norway, is a writer and a spoken word poet who combines her live performances with throat singing.⁵⁵ Aviaq Johnston is an author of young adult fiction, currently finishing the last volume of her fantasy trilogy *Those Who Run in the Sky* (2017, 2019).⁵⁶ Finally, Tanya Tagaq is another prominent contemporary voice in Inuit literature.

Reflecting the themes appearing in contemporary literature, Canadian Indigenous literary studies focus on emerging literary nationalism, the themes of settler-colonialism and reconciliation, Indigenous genders and sexualities, as well as the issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women.⁵⁷

⁵³ *Owl and the Raven: An Eskimo Legend*, directed by Co Hoedeman (National Film Board of Canada, 1973), https://www.nfb.ca/film/owl_raven_eskimo_legend.

⁵⁴ Norma Dunning, *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* (Edmonton, Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 2017), ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵⁵ "Taqralik Partridge," *Inuit Art Quarterly*, accessed July 2, 2024, <https://www.inuitartfoundation.org/profiles/artist/Taqralik-Partridge>.

⁵⁶ "Aviaq Johnston," *Inuit Art Quarterly*, accessed July 2, 2024, <https://www.inuitartfoundation.org/profiles/artist/Aviaq-Johnston>.

⁵⁷ Daniel Morley Johnson, "Introduction: Contemporary Concerns," in *Learn, Teach, Challenge*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 319, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/49036>.

1.5 Tanya Tagaq

Tanya Tagaq, born in 1975 in Ikaluktutiak (Cambridge Bay on Victoria Island) in the territory of Nunavut, is an artist renowned for her music and throat singing. After publishing her debut novel *Split Tooth* in 2018, Tagaq became a best-selling author.⁵⁸

As a musician, she has released six albums: *Sinaa*, *Auk/Blood*, *Animism*, *Retribution*, *Toothsayer* and *Tongues*.⁵⁹ Her music has been acclaimed for “undermining mainstream representational practices regarding Indigenous identity” and “presenting Indigenous-centred sounds and perspectives.”⁶⁰ Her art frequently addresses themes such as colonization, the relationship towards the environment, and violence against Indigenous people, especially women.⁶¹ Tagaq herself attended a residential school in the north.⁶²

Tagaq’s music is influenced by the tradition of Inuit throat singing, “katajaaq.” Nevertheless, Tagaq does not strictly follow the traditional practices of the art, she creates her own version thereof.⁶³ The tradition’s origin lies in a playful game of two women which stops when one of them starts laughing or runs out of breath. They try to achieve so through rhythmic breathing and throat sounds.⁶⁴ In traditional throat singing, two women face each other and exchange a series of sounds created solely by their breathing. Tagaq, however, did not have a partner when she started learning how to throat sing during

⁵⁸ “About,” *Tanya Tagaq*, accessed July 2, 2024. <https://www.tanyatagaq.com/about>.

⁵⁹ “Discography,” *Tanya Tagaq*, accessed July 2, 2024, <https://www.tanyatagaq.com/discography>.

⁶⁰ Alexa Woloshyn, “‘Welcome to the Tundra’: Tanya Tagaq’s Creative and Communicative Agency as Political Strategy,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 4 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12254>.

⁶¹ Woloshyn, “‘Welcome to the Tundra,’” 5.

⁶² Olivia Michiko Gagnon, “Singing with *Nanook of the North*: On Tanya Tagaq, Feeling Entangled, and Colonial Archives of Indigeneity,” *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 1 (2020): 48. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2020.0002>.

⁶³ Woloshyn, “‘Welcome to the Tundra,’” 4.

⁶⁴ Gagnon, “Singing with *Nanook of the North*,” 49.

her studies at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design.⁶⁵ At that time, the tradition was still stigmatized, and Tagaq was forced to teach herself and practice solo. Through her perseverance and determination to continue throat singing, she showed the ability to adapt, a crucial Inuit value.⁶⁶

Moreover, Tagaq has been praised for challenging the conventional binaries of “past/present” and “traditional/modern.”⁶⁷ In one of her live performances, she sang along to the quiet film *Nanook of the North* (1922), directed by Robert Flaherty. The film, mapping the life of Inuit people, is considered the first-ever film documentary. Yet, the director staged most scenes to comply with his vision – to present Inuit people as innocent, naïve, and simple.⁶⁸ Tagaq’s throat singing both accompanies and disrupts the film’s narrative.⁶⁹ Given that the film is “central to Canada’s (and cinema’s) colonial apparatus,” Tagaq created a significant decolonial statement through her semi-improvisational performance.⁷⁰

Tagaq also frequently shares her concerns and critiques on current political issues in public space. She was a prominent voice in the controversial discussion on seal hunting. In 2014, an animal rights organization, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), together with celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres, condemned seal hunting as atrocious and inhumane. In response, Indigenous people posted “sealfies” – photos of themselves, dressed in seal skin clothes or eating seal meat.⁷¹ The Sealfie campaign

⁶⁵ Sherry Coman, “Ever Deadly,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 26, no. 2 (2022): 2. <http://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.02>.

⁶⁶ Gagnon, “Singing with *Nanook of the North*,” 58.

⁶⁷ Woloshyn, “Welcome to the Tundra,” 2.

⁶⁸ Woloshyn, “Welcome to the Tundra,” 8.

⁶⁹ Gagnon, “Singing with *Nanook of the North*,” 49.

⁷⁰ Gagnon, “Singing with *Nanook of the North*,” 56.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Rule, “Seals, Selfies, and the Settler State: Indigenous Motherhood and Gendered Violence in Canada,” *American Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2018): 741–2. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26794777>.

highlighted the importance of seal hunting for Indigenous communities, showing that it is a part of their daily life, upon which they depend and approach with respect.⁷²

Recently, Tagaq collaborated with filmmaker Chelsea McMullan to create a documentary and a performance art film *Ever Deadly* (2022) which explores her work with sound.⁷³

1.6 Introduction to *Split Tooth*

Tanya Tagaq's debut novel *Split Tooth* (2018) defies standard literary categorizations. The text combines both prose and poetry, shifting between the genres of memoir and complete fiction, presenting realistic narration, alongside “dreamscape” scenes.⁷⁴

The book is dedicated to the “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and survivals of residential schools,” reminding readers of the enduring impact of systematic abuses on the communities.⁷⁵ In Canada, Indigenous women and girls face a significantly higher risk of experiencing violence compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.⁷⁶ This violence is understood as a legacy of historical injustices. Governmental policies imposed upon Indigenous communities caused severe disruption to their lives – forced relocations, separation of families, impoverishment and undermining people's self-value.⁷⁷ As a result, Indigenous women often suffer from social

⁷² Emiliano Battistini, “‘Sealfie’, ‘Phoque You’ and ‘Animism’: The Canadian Inuit Answer to the United-States Anti-Sealing Activism,” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law – Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique* 31, no. 3 (2018): 578, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-018-9562-0>.

⁷³ Coman, “Ever Deadly,” 1–5.

⁷⁴ Keavy Martin, “[Review of *Split Tooth*, by T. Tagaq,]” *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 159, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/natiindistudj.7.1.0159>.

⁷⁵ Martin, “[Review],” 160.

⁷⁶ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and Canada Privy Council Office, *Reclaiming Power and Peace (Volume 2): A Supplementary Report* (Ottawa: Privy Council Office, 2019), 1, https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_2_Quebec_Report-1.pdf.

⁷⁷ Amnesty International, *No More Stolen Sisters: The Need for a Comprehensive Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada* (London: Amnesty International, 2004), 6, https://www.amnesty.ca/sites/amnesty/files/Stolen%20Sisters%202004%20Summary%20Report_0.pdf.

and economic marginalization, leading to unequal access to education, employment or housing.⁷⁸ Consequently, these women are more vulnerable to exploitation, domestic and lateral violence, racism, hate crimes and sexual assaults.⁷⁹

The book is divided into small segments, some titled and others unnamed. The lack of specificity is characteristic of the whole story: the narrator remains nameless, and we rarely encounter other characters' names or concrete locations. Accompanied by illustrations by Jaime Fernandez, the narration unfolds a coming-of-age story of a young girl living in 1970s Nunavut. She experiences teenage hardships of friendships and first loves. She tries to find her place in the world of never-ending winter. Nature is portrayed as a seductive force that accelerates her transition into adulthood. Her life changes dramatically when she becomes pregnant by the Northern Lights and must care for her baby twins.⁸⁰

The protagonist herself witnesses both alcohol and sexual abuse, yet she is not merely a victim. Her story is also one of empowerment and resurgence. Within the story, claiming power can mean disrupting ongoing violence, sometimes paradoxically achieved through further violence. Tagaq thus creates a provoking and philosophical text.⁸¹

⁷⁸ National Inquiry into Missing and Murder Indigenous Women and Girls, and Canada Privy Council Office, *Reclaiming Power*, 36.

⁷⁹ Amnesty International, *No More Stolen Sisters*, 5; National Inquiry into Missing and Murder Indigenous Women and Girls, and Canada Privy Council Office, *Reclaiming Power*, 31.

⁸⁰ Tanya Tagaq, *Split Tooth* (Toronto, Ontario: Viking Canada, 2018).

⁸¹ Martin, “[Review],” 159–60.

Critics have praised the book for its ability to navigate multiple modes, demonstrating “the interplay between Inuit culture and Quallunaat⁸² influences, of the space between human-animal and spiritual realms, between youth and adulthood.”⁸³

⁸² Inuktitut term meaning “non-Inuit” or “white people”

⁸³ Knut Tjensvoll Kitching, “Review of [Tagaq, Tanya, 2018. *Split Tooth*, New York, Viking Press, 189 pages],” *Études Inuit Studies* 46, no. 1 (2022): 229, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1096509ar>.

2. *Wonderwork* as a Conceptual Tool for Literary Analysis

The current discourse about Indigenous rights in Canada has shifted into the period of “post-colonialism,” suggesting that colonialism is a “finished business” and the colonizers, therefore, have left.⁸⁴ However, the societal and political landscapes are more complex; the eras of colonialism and post-colonialism blend into each other and can co-exist simultaneously. With that in mind, it is necessary to highlight that the current effects of colonialism are vastly different from those in the 19th and 20th centuries, which were marked by the residential school system or bans on Indigenous languages. The post-colonial era does not equate to a world without *any* form of colonialism. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Māori scholar and a researcher in Indigenous studies and education, contends that today’s imperialistic thinking is more covert, hidden in a new set of vocabulary: “The language of imperialism may have changed, the specific targets of colonization may have shifted and Indigenous groups may be better informed, but imperialism still exists.”⁸⁵

2.1 Decolonization of Research

Smith points out that decolonization is a long-term and ongoing process and requires continuing actions to address and dissect colonial power in civil services, psychology, linguistics, and culture.⁸⁶ Consequently, the period of post-colonialism has been marked by re-evaluating the understanding of the term “research.” Historically, research was associated with the endeavours of European colonizers, often marginalizing the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous peoples.⁸⁷ To understand the cultures in their complexity, it is necessary to first critically analyze the methodologies and methods of research. The initial step is to “decolonize” the conventionally used methods. As Smith

⁸⁴ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 112.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 114.

⁸⁶ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 112.

⁸⁷ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1.

says, decolonization of methods does not require a complete rejection of all Western knowledge, but rather “centr[es] [Indigenous] concerns and world views and then com[es]to know and understand theory and research from [Indigenous] perspectives and for [Indigenous] purposes.”⁸⁸

Though Smith refers to research in general, the same approaches can be applied when discussing literary criticism. Gauging any type of literature against written European tradition was seen as counterproductive already in the 1990s.⁸⁹ In a recent work, scholar and poet Kimberly Blaeser, an enrolled member of the White Earth Nation, draws a parallel between the analysis of literature and colonialism. When we approach a literary text with an established theory in mind, we assess to what extent the text complies with the recognized literary criteria. This attitude mirrors the trajectory of colonization, wherein a dominant authority shapes the interpretation of Indigeneity. Contrary to the approach, Blaeser encourages working *within* Native literature or tradition. Like Smith, Blaeser does not dismiss Western knowledge in literary criticism. She acknowledges that many of the literary texts are bi-cultural in themselves. They may be created in an oral-based culture and later collected in a written form, or the author’s mother tongue is an Indigenous language, but they decide to write most of the story in English, which guarantees a wider readership. As the texts can blend two (or more) cultural influences, it is also possible for the literary criticism to work with diverse inputs.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 42.

⁸⁹ Agnes Grant, “Contemporary Native Women’s Voices in Literature,” in *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*, ed. W. H. New (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991), 124.

⁹⁰ Kimberly M. Blaeser, “Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Centre,” in *Learn, Teach, Challenge*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 233–4, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/49036>.

2.2 Realistic versus Speculative Fiction

As Blaeser suggests, revising the conceptual tools for literary analysis of Indigenous literature is one possibility for working *within* the frame of Indigenous literature.

Indigenous literature was interpreted as a realistic (as in “accurate and true to life”⁹¹) testimony of Indigenous experience, pushing against the narratives and stereotypes created by colonial writers. The stories could reveal the misrepresentations established by non-Indigenous authors. For this reason, various forms of realistic writing were more favoured than speculative fiction by Indigenous communities. Indigenous literature had to strive to become an accepted part of the literary canon and speculative fiction might have shattered its position, as such authors were perceived as “silly, simplistic, escapist, or delusional.”⁹²

This approach assumes that a book must be realistic to claim its literary value. If a story fails to comply with this dominant worldview, it is deemed defective or irrational. However, the question of *what “real” is* shatters when we investigate the history of literature about Indigenous cultures. Most books that we interpret as realistic, and which could therefore be deemed valuable, were written by colonizers. Their accounts often include biased, inaccurate or false information about the life of the Native people.⁹³ “The real” captured by the colonizers does not represent reality. Their work is, on the other hand, *colonial fantasy*, which was supposed to justify the violence happening against Indigenous people.⁹⁴

⁹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “realistic (*adj.*),” accessed July 3, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9010121028>.

⁹² Daniel H. Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Ontario, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 140–1.

⁹³ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 142.

⁹⁴ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 141.

Today's understanding of "the real" has shifted, bringing forward the stories of contemporary struggles such as substance abuse, language loss or land dispossessions.⁹⁵ Yet, many Indigenous authors find that the genres of fantastic, horror or science-fiction give them new possibilities to explore the same themes of decolonization. Thanks to the non-real elements used within speculative fiction, they can complement or even challenge the established narratives and envision different realities than those non-Indigenous societies presume to be true. Though the fantastic is seen as a code that opposes "the real," the distinction between the two modes of reality is not always binary.⁹⁶ The stories might include some tropes that would be interpreted as fantastical elements in the traditional understanding of literature, such as spirit beings, speaking animals or natural forces. The same tropes, however, are understood as realities in most traditional Indigenous systems.⁹⁷

"The fantastic is an extension of the possible, not the impossible,"⁹⁸ explains Daniel H. Justice, a literary scholar and member of the Cherokee Nation, adding that those stories have the potential to dispute beliefs of "the real" and, consequently, destabilize the colonial narrative. However, labelling a story as "fantastical" also poses particular challenges. Mainstream fantastical narratives often employ motifs that Indigenous writers try to counter. For example, one of these motifs is the character of a white saviour – a hero from the dominant society who intervenes to aid a marginalized community while disregarding their agency.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 147–8.

⁹⁶ Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 12.

⁹⁷ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 141.

⁹⁸ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 148.

⁹⁹ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 149.

2.3 Defining the Concept of Wonderworks

Recognizing authors' Indigeneity is vital in acknowledging their experiences and positions in today's world, as their perspectives will differ from non-Indigenous ones. At the same time, it is crucial to be aware of the heterogeneous nature of Indigeneity, which complicates the simple binary of Indigenous versus non-Indigenous.¹⁰⁰ Regarding literature, if we want to study it ethically, we should "rid ourselves of preconceived notions of linear and dualistic thinking and be open to complexities and indeterminacies."¹⁰¹

The tendency to resist simplified categorizations and to avoid being defined solely by cultural values is evident in contemporary literature. For instance, Haisla writer Eden Robinson gained acclaim for her novel *Monkey Beach* (2000), which blends multiple genres. The book explores universal themes, such as family relations, while addressing specific Indigenous experiences like losing native land and culture.¹⁰²

However, literary critics should also look beyond cultural identity. Agnes Grant, a Canadian Indigenous literature and educational issues researcher, highlights the need to value artistic identity.¹⁰³ Consequently, this liberates Indigenous authors to work within their imaginative freedom without being restricted by the expectations tied to their Indigeneity.¹⁰⁴ Such a shift can enrich literary criticism and, at the same time, also empower Indigenous writers to defy genres or explore a broader range of themes and styles.

¹⁰⁰ Eigenbrod, *Travelling Knowledges*, 144.

¹⁰¹ Eigenbrod, *Travelling Knowledges*, 206.

¹⁰² Sarah Henzi, "Betwixt and Between': Alternative Genres, Languages, and Indigeneity," in *Learn, Teach, Challenge*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016): 489, muse.jhu.edu/book/49036.

¹⁰³ Grant, "Contemporary Native Women's Voices in Literature," 125.

¹⁰⁴ Grant, "Contemporary Native Women's Voices in Literature," 125; Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 104.

For example, the labels of “speculative fiction” or “fantasy” bear the burden of being seen as trivial or superficial and do not encompass the complexities of Indigenous non-real stories. Daniel H. Justice, therefore, suggests a new term, “wonderworks.” Unlike the word “fantasy,” which clearly distinguishes between real/true and unreal/false, the term “wonder” implies uncertainties and curiosities. Wonderworks blends both fantasy and realism without understanding those two as binaries. The notion of “wonder” suggests a feeling of mystery that captivates us. The experience of wonder might even be unfathomable, though not automatically dangerous or unfamiliar. Wonderworks “remind us that other worlds exist; other realities abide alongside and within our own.”¹⁰⁵ They offer different realities than those imposed by the settler-colonial imagination. Wonderworks show readers varied ways to relate to one another or the world. They are based on possibilities and differences, underlying those realities as *distinct* and not deficient.¹⁰⁶ One of the aims of wonderworks is to challenge the colonial deficit model. The deficit model stereotype presumes that Indigenous peoples lack certain traits or abilities such as morals, laws, culture, language, ambition, hygiene, desire, or love.¹⁰⁷ The stereotype is a consequence of settler-colonial actions and the perception of the Indigenous peoples is directly impacted by it.¹⁰⁸ The narratives of wonderworks, however, alter the perspective.

Justice understands the transcendency of wonderworks which exceeds their literary value. He stresses the importance of Indigenous imagination necessary for the

¹⁰⁵ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 153.

¹⁰⁶ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 155.

¹⁰⁷ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 4.

future. “We can’t possibly live otherwise until we first *imagine* otherwise,”¹⁰⁹ he explains, addressing the viewpoint of Indigenous writers and readers.

Moreover, even the sheer existence of Indigenous literature is a sign of decolonization. Narration of stories or “imagin[ing] possibilities of a life lived otherwise” is a central idea of what Justice calls the “decolonization imperative.”¹¹⁰ The literature, created by Indigenous people and capturing the stories of Indigenous lives, ousts the colonial narratives.

In summary, Indigenous wonderworks work with three main ideas. They do not distinguish between “the real” and “the unreal”; they disrupt the stereotypical tropes about Indigenous peoples established by the settler-colonial imagery (such as the idea of Indigenous deficiency), and lastly, they are part of a broader decolonization process, offering the possibilities of healing and envisioning different futures.¹¹¹

2.4 Comparing Wonderworks with Fantastic and Magical Realism

Wonderworks are not the same as the fantastic or magical realism fiction. The fantastic is set in a world with two different layers of reality: one is perceived as logical and familiar, while the other disrupts the expected normality.¹¹² Fantastic requires a form of antinomy, “the simultaneous presence of two *conflicting* codes in the text.”¹¹³ Because the code of “the unreal” opposes “the real,” there might be attempts to rationalize and explain the supernatural events happening within the story. In comparison, while wonderworks also

¹⁰⁹ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 156.

¹¹⁰ Daniel H. Justice, “A Relevant Resonance,” in *Across Cultures, Across Borders: Canadian Aboriginal and Native American Literatures*, ed. Emma LaRocque, Paul W. DePasquale and Renate Eigenbrod (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2010), 66.

¹¹¹ Kirstie Goodfellow, “Reframing Timelines: Daniel David Moses and Indigenous Wonderworks in the 1980s,” *Tba: Journal of Art, Media, and Visual Culture* 3, no. 1 (2021): 166, <https://doi.org/10.5206/tba.v3i1.13943>.

¹¹² Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 5.

¹¹³ Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 12.

present two modes of existence, their realities are not put into juxtaposition. As they are not clearly defined, there is no desire to search for a rational explanation, as in the case of the fantastic.

The definition of wonderworks is also close to the understanding of magical realism, which similarly employs “the unreal” in its narratives.¹¹⁴ Though the two modes of reality are still conflicting, they are independently coherent at the same time.¹¹⁵ Moreover, magical realism does not put the rational and the magical in opposition as the fantastic does but merges them into one reality. “The unreal” is integrated into the world of “the real.” For this reason, the narrative usually does not deal with attempts to rationalize unreal occurrences. The intended reader accepts “the unreal” as part of the world, yet they must acknowledge that “the unreal” is rationally impossible. Without this understanding of “the unreal,” magical realism cannot exist.¹¹⁶ Magical realism thus still works with the distinction of a singular conventional reality under which “the unreal” is subsumed.

Chanady’s definition favours “the real” and leaves “the unreal” in a dependent position. In her perspective, the amalgamation of the two types of reality is thus not complete. In comparison, wonderworks do not distinguish between “the real” and “the unreal.” They do not try to present one worldview – on the contrary, they can show the reader various worldviews. In addition, there is a difference between the vocabulary which both Chanady and Justice use in their explanations. Chanady employs words such as “irrational,” “illogical,” or “impossible,” demonstrating the superiority of the real world. Justice, however, talks about “the unreal” as a useful *extension* of “the real.”

¹¹⁴ Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 18.

¹¹⁵ Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 21.

¹¹⁶ Chanady, *Magical Realism*, 21–22.

2.5 Wonderworks and Indigenous Futurism

Justice himself helps to expound wonderworks by sharing a sample list of Indigenous wonderworks. The document includes well-established authors such as Eden Robinson, as well as young aspiring writers.¹¹⁷ He also includes several scholars who explore Indigenous speculative fiction, one of them being Grace Dillon, an author of the anthology of Indigenous futuristic stories.

Indigenous futurism is a genre that envisions imaginary future worlds, centres around the lives of Indigenous people, and often focuses on topics of race, technology, and power.¹¹⁸

Justice refers to Dillon's work in his explanation of wonderworks. The concept of wonderworks is based on the principles Dillon outlined for Indigenous futurism. According to Dillon, the genre of Indigenous futurism can free the authors from the expectations of what a Native author "should" write and opens new possibilities of how to question and challenge the colonial power.¹¹⁹ The narratives deal with the consequences of colonization and the life *after*. Indigenous futurism encourages "Native writers to write about Native conditions in Native-centered worlds liberated by imagination."¹²⁰ The liberation itself is an externalization of the decolonization process – an example of what Justice calls the decolonization imperative.

However, unlike Justice, Dillon cites more specific characteristics that regularly occur in Indigenous futuristic stories. Native slipstream, for example, presents time (past, present, or future) as a river flow – readers can thus travel in time or explore alternate

¹¹⁷ Daniel H. Justice, "A Sampling of Indigenous Wonderworks," accessed May 5, 2024. <http://danielheathjustice.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Indigenous-Wonderworks.pdf>.

¹¹⁸ Grace L. Dillon, *Walking the Clouds* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2012), 11.

¹¹⁹ Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*, 3.

¹²⁰ Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*, 11.

realities.¹²¹ This approach aligns with Justice’s idea of “imagining *otherwise*.” Other features of Indigenous futurism include the theme of conquest and rewriting the traditional science fiction trope of contact with an alien/other.¹²² This allows the writer to explore oppression and (de)colonization from a new perspective. Indigenous futurism also deals with science, which should not be understood only as Western scientific methods. The themes of Indigenous science encompass people’s relationships with other-than-human beings (either in nature, spiritual or mechanical).¹²³ In this notion, we can see the similarity with Justice’s approach which draws attention to centring Indigenous realities.

2.6 Reading Indigenous Literatures

In the world of rethinking approaches to literature, it is useful to mention a reading method suggested by Keavy Martin, an Indigenous literature scholar. Drawing from Inuit culture, she suggests understanding literature (including oral stories and songs) as nourishment. Reading and interpretation can be seen as a hunt and a subsequent harvest. This approach “offers readers the opportunity to enter into reciprocal relationships”¹²⁴ instead of mindless consummation. We can understand the texts as being *nourishing* for us without wanting to appropriate them. Readers bear the responsibility to ensure their engagement with the texts is ethical. “[A]lthough most readers of Indigenous literature strive to speak respectfully about the texts with which they are engaged, they wouldn’t think twice about *arguing* about them—occasionally in a combative sense and always in pursuit of persuasion,”¹²⁵ adds Martin and encourages readers to put aside Western

¹²¹ Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*, 3.

¹²² Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*, 6.

¹²³ Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*, 7–8.

¹²⁴ Keavy Martin, “The Hunting and Harvesting of Inuit Literature,” in *Learn, Teach, Challenge*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 446, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/49036>.

¹²⁵ Martin, “Hunting and Harvesting,” 455.

rhetoric traditions based on authority in favour of appreciating the text as one would their nourishment. She tries to apply this advice to her classroom, in which she occasionally asks the students to write an essay that is intentionally *not* built around a thesis statement and its argument.¹²⁶ Through simple exercises like this, we might alter our relationship with the text we read and later analyze.

¹²⁶ Martin, "Hunting and Harvesting," 454.

3. Reading and Analysis of *Split Tooth*

This chapter will examine how Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth* fits the definition of the literary genre of wonderwork. Through employing the strategy of close reading, it will analyze how the novel incorporates three characteristics of wonderworks described in the previous segment: the permeation of "the unreal" into "the real," the disruption of stereotypical tropes imposed by settler-colonial narratives, and the vision of different futures.

3.1 "The Real" and "The Unreal" as One Setting

The first condition that defines wonderworks is the non-existent line between "the real" and "the unreal." What is traditionally perceived as a binary is blended in a wonderwork, creating uncertainty, curiosity and ambiguity that may be incomprehensible to the reader's understanding.¹²⁷

Split Tooth equally presents both modes of existence. The opening chapter, briefly titled "1975," sets the story within a concrete and realistic timeframe.¹²⁸ Two more dates, 1978 and 1982, appear in the novel, spanning the story over at least seven years.¹²⁹ Throughout the story, time is measured according to the cycles of Arctic nature – months of continuous lightness are followed by months of darkness.¹³⁰ Yet, time is not only a unit of measurement.

On the contrary, time in *Split Tooth* "does not obey the clock,"¹³¹ and is a living and conscious force, both a conductor and a demise of people's lives. People do not move

¹²⁷ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 153.

¹²⁸ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 1.

¹²⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 36, 81.

¹³⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 142.

¹³¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 110.

through time by their existence; it is the time that “travel through [them], drives [them].”¹³² Time is not merely static information but a propeller of one’s life. In its effect, the novel intricately intertwines concrete temporal settings with a transcendental portrayal of time, underling the sense of ambiguity.

The spatial settings are revealed at the story’s beginning, locating the narrative in “the High Arctic.”¹³³ At the same time, this world is already influenced by the southerners or people living outside the Arctic zone. When describing the walls of her home, the protagonist says that “[v]elvet art hung [on them], usually of Elvis or Jesus, but also polar bears and Eskimos.”¹³⁴ The characters associated with the southern world are next to the north’s representatives, showing the two cultures’ co-existence. Moreover, it is the only time Tagaq uses what is now considered a derogatory term for Inuit. “Eskimo” is a word imposed upon the Indigenous people by colonizers.¹³⁵ The narrator thus subtly addresses the misrepresentation the colonizers created – depicting “Eskimos” instead of seeing “Inuit” – and highlights the split between the two worlds.

One layer of the story is a coming-of-age narrative through which the reader follows the growth of a young girl into a woman. The protagonist is a teenage girl who grapples with universal girlhood experiences such as having acne, liking a boy, and body insecurities (“I want to be the size of an ant, or just disappear. This year everyone got boobs except me,”¹³⁶ she says), or the desire to fit in (“I fail tests on purpose to avoid

¹³² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 110.

¹³³ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 11.

¹³⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 1.

¹³⁵ “Inuit Circumpolar Council Resolution 2010 – 01,” *Inuit Circumpolar Council*, accessed July 31, 2024, <https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/iccexouncilresolutiononterminuit.pdf>.

¹³⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 39.

drawing too much ire from the popular girls, who seemed to think that accomplishing anything scholastically made you vain,”¹³⁷ she admits).

The descriptions of her teenagehood become painfully realistic as she bluntly shares her experience as a survivor of sexual abuse. In a poem innocently titled “A Day in the Life,” she portrays an ordinary school day, which is marked by “[t]he teacher squirming his finger under [her] panties / Under the desk / He looks around and pretend he’s not doing it.”¹³⁸ Even within her peers, she does not feel completely safe as “[t]he boys chase us and hold us down / Touch our pussies and non-existent boobs,”¹³⁹ which she accepts as a necessary presupposition to be liked.

Sexual abuse is a recurring theme throughout the novel. The protagonist discloses the child’s incomprehension of her molester’s actions: “‘Just let me get it wet’ he said / What does he mean?”¹⁴⁰ Yet, as Tagaq masters to be straightforward and candid, she can be equally subtle. The poem “Sternum,” describing various functions a human’s breastbone has, suddenly twists at its very end: “The sternum is the shield / Even when impaired / Even when it smothers a little girl’s face / As the bedsprings squeak.”¹⁴¹ However, this poem already foreshadows that the narrator will fight back against the violence she was forced to endure, being bound but not broken, much like the sternum in the poem.

In a later poem, the lyrical subject addresses all survivors of sexual abuse who “were entered too young,”¹⁴² commenting on the struggles they face *after* surviving and

¹³⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 39.

¹³⁸ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 4.

¹³⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 4.

¹⁴⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 22.

¹⁴¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 17.

¹⁴² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 41.

ironically calling it “the gift rape gives.”¹⁴³ As the emotional intensity of the poem increases (“It is not violence against women; It is violence done by men”¹⁴⁴), the form also shifts, creating a long string of words without punctuation instead of breaking the poem into lines. The poem concludes with an ambiguous catharsis by referring to the collective “we”: “I stand up tall In the hope we can all heal And I drown / My head full of tar.”¹⁴⁵

However, the theme of sexual exploitation and sexuality in general extends beyond “the real” mode of the narrative. When the protagonist encounters the “[f]antastical and omnipotent”¹⁴⁶ Northern Lights, her contact with the mighty Arctic force is sexual. The Lights fill the girl with a green light, causing her both agony and ecstasy. She refers to these conflicting sensations as leaving her “healed with torture,”¹⁴⁷ demonstrating the intricate interconnection of healing and violence – a theme revisited multiple times in the novel. The intensity of the girl’s physical pain is so severe that she believes she is dying, yet she survives, emerging “naked and freezing”¹⁴⁸ and “shaking violently.”¹⁴⁹ Though she does not describe her experience as entirely negative (by using the words “healed” or “ecstasy”), the event is intimidating as she does not have a say in what happens, and the actions of the Lights render her powerless.

After this night, which she keeps a secret, she gains new abilities which deepen “the unreal” character of the event. Her health improves, she can heal unnaturally quickly,

¹⁴³ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 41.

¹⁴⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 41.

¹⁴⁵ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 41.

¹⁴⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 113.

¹⁴⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 114.

¹⁴⁸ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 114.

¹⁴⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 114.

and her eyes are greener than before.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, the Lights impregnate her with twins with supernatural abilities.¹⁵¹

Reflecting on her bond with the Northern Lights, the main protagonist says that no one could ever know her the way they do, yet when she needs their help, the Lights “look [her] in the soul with cold indifference,”¹⁵² demonstrating that they do not perceive her as their equal. Consequently, she longs for a more tender relationship: “I want to be loved instead of forcefully taken, to feel clean instead of invaded.”¹⁵³ This sentiment emphasizes the parallel between the sexual abuse she endures as a girl and the encounter with the Lights. The mirroring of these experiences, which leave her overpowered in both “the real” and “the unreal” scenes, illustrates how these settings blend into one cohesive reality.

The Lights are not the only natural *and* sexual force in the story. Even before, the girl dreams of an enormous fox who seeks a cure for his curse. She can revert the curse through sexual contact with the fox.¹⁵⁴ In comparison, the relationship with the fox is not described as violently as with the Lights. When the girl meets the fox again, outside her dreamscape, she talks about him being “more beautiful than any human.”¹⁵⁵ The fox is a token of the natural world, “[c]lean, strong, devoted to survival, and unburdened by all the falsehoods that humans subconsciously subscribe to.”¹⁵⁶ He is a part of the Arctic world and her friend.

¹⁵⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 116.

¹⁵¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 132–3.

¹⁵² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 182.

¹⁵³ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 175.

¹⁵⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 89.

¹⁵⁵ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 103.

¹⁵⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 103.

On a different occasion, she accidentally plunges into ice-cold ocean water. Tiny ice floes around her start to shapeshift into small polar bears that try to console her. One of the bears increases in size so that she can climb on his back to be saved. The bear is not merely her companion anymore; they have become lovers: “The ocean and our love fuse the polar bear and me. He is I, his skin is my skin.”¹⁵⁷ Their connection is so close that “[her] body absorbs him and [they] become a new being.”¹⁵⁸ This union underscores the protagonist’s profound and intrinsic connection with nature.

All the various encounters with the representatives of the animal world can be viewed as part of “the unreal” in *Split Tooth*’s world, as the main protagonist interacts with them as if they were humans. However, the book repeatedly reminds the reader that there is no such thing as a “real-unreal” opposition in the narrative. The narrator achieves this by acknowledging the unity people have with nature. “We ARE the land, same molecules, and same atoms. The land is our salvation. Save Our Souls,”¹⁵⁹ she exclaims, approaching nature with spiritual sacrament. Being united with the rest of the world brings consolation to the girl. “We are everything. We are all and we are nothing,”¹⁶⁰ she contemplates, later adding that “[m]aybe the earth misses our bodies the way a mother misses a newborn (...). Maybe my minerals will come back quickly as a plant or insect.”¹⁶¹ By foregrounding the essential connection of people to nature and creating a sense of oneness, the narrator accepts the natural or “the unreal” forces to be in harmony with “the real” ones.

¹⁵⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 93.

¹⁵⁸ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 93.

¹⁵⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 62.

¹⁶⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 111.

¹⁶¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 131.

As previously mentioned, the protagonist's encounter with the Northern Lights is both violent and sexual, resulting in her pregnancy. The pregnancy supports the joint "real-unreal" mode. As any young mother-to-be, the protagonist feels anxious about telling the news to her parents; how can she be "their baby and have babies too"?¹⁶² Still, she is overflowing with motherly love, finally feeling complete.¹⁶³ "The unreal" mode is represented by granting the babies special abilities. The babies are twins, yet they are one, capable of shapeshifting, separating themselves or joining as they desire.¹⁶⁴ Their birth is also not conventional. The Northern Lights descend to comfort the young mother while she gives birth to three feet long and only centimetres narrow beings who later transform themselves to look like ordinary babies. The mother immediately becomes attached to them, expressing how beautiful they are and how much she loves them.¹⁶⁵

Since the babies are a part of one wholeness, they command powers on the opposite side of the spectrum. The daughter Naja is a healer; she can alleviate pain and strengthen the health of the one who holds her. Contrary to Naja, her brother Savik can let pain increase and hurt people, gravitating towards people who have negativity or cruelty in themselves.¹⁶⁶ The narrator's worry and love for her children, complemented by the babies' fantastical abilities inherited from their "Maker" (as the protagonist refers to the Northern Lights),¹⁶⁷ once again creates a single reality, combined by "the real" and "the unreal" elements.

The examples above demonstrate that the novel seamlessly intertwines "the real" and "the unreal." The story is grounded in a concrete time-space while simultaneously

¹⁶² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 140.

¹⁶³ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 143.

¹⁶⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 144–5.

¹⁶⁵ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 154–5.

¹⁶⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 158–9.

¹⁶⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 153.

governed by the laws of nature. The reader follows a coming-of-age narrative of a young girl who experiences conventional adolescent struggles. Moreover, her story realistically captures sexual and gendered abuse. The question of power imbalance recurs when the girl engages with “the unreal” world. The Northern Lights overwhelm and impregnate her. Her other explorations of sexuality in the natural world are not as violent; they are rather empowering in contrast. The girl creates strong and sexual bonds with a fox and a polar bear, emphasizing her unity with the natural and spiritual worlds, which becomes a part of the story’s reality. A similar blend of the two modes is evident in the young woman’s journey to becoming a mother. Having regular mother-to-be anxieties, she needs to take care of her babies, who inherited special powers from the Northern Lights, one perpetuating and the other relieving violence. By blurring the boundaries of “the real-unreal,” *Split Tooth* creates a convincing setting for a case of wonderwork.

3.2 Disrupting the Settler-Colonial Stereotypes

The second characteristic that defines wonderwork is the text’s ability to counter the stereotypical tropes of settler-colonizer imagination.¹⁶⁸ *Split Tooth* displaces the colonizer narrative by centring the perspective of Indigenous people, criticizing colonialism and its detrimental effects, and extending the Inuit storytelling tradition.

One untitled poem directly addresses the settler-colonizer narrative, which intentionally aimed to harm the Indigenous people: “This tapestry has not been woven / By accident / Silken deception / Falsehoods twisted into each fibre.”¹⁶⁹ In opposition, the lyrical subject asserts their agency to counteract this narrative, offering complexity missing in the settler-colonizer discourse: “When *we* weave, / We weave past longing,

¹⁶⁸ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 2.

¹⁶⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 58.

past glory, past greed.”¹⁷⁰ Reclaiming their position is not described only as peaceful, almost passive, as weaving is. It is a forcible act of resistance: “We plant ideas / With bullets we heed / We raise fists we draw / Fine lines to hold each other / Up against the ships.”¹⁷¹ The poem calls for resurgence, conveying belief they will achieve it: “We will harvest the truth. / We will collect the rent. / This tapestry is being rewoven.”¹⁷² Analysing the poem from a meta-literary perspective, *reweaving the tapestry* is also what Tagaq herself contributes to by having written *Split Tooth*. The tapestry can be understood as the story of the Inuit people, historically shaped by settler-colonizers. Tagaq reflects on the significance of storytelling by creating her own narrative, in which she distorts the established ones and reclaims Indigenous identity and experiences. She actively participates in the process of “reweaving the tapestry” herself. In *Split Tooth*, Tagaq created an empowering story that has become a best-selling book and has been translated into three more languages (French, German, and Estonian).¹⁷³ The novel as such realizes the poem’s meaning: it foregrounds the Indigenous perspective, ousting the oppressive settler-colonizer imagination.

Another significant aspect that corroborates the disruption of the colonizer narrative is the acknowledgement of the harm inflicted upon Indigenous people. The protagonist reflects on the history of colonization, struggling to comprehend the extent of control the colonizers tried to impose on Indigenous lives: “I never understood how foreigners could come and tell us where to die and where to live. Where to be buried and how to breed.”¹⁷⁴ Her family also contends with the consequences of the colonizers’

¹⁷⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 58.

¹⁷¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 58.

¹⁷² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 59.

¹⁷³ “Split Tooth, Editions,” *Goodreads*, accessed July 21, 2024, <https://www.goodreads.com/work/editions/62048801-split-tooth>.

¹⁷⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 119.

oppression. The narrator contemplates her mother, who lived amid the clashes of two cultures. She portrays her as a woman who grew up in sod houses and igloos, following the practices of local shamans. This traditional life was, however, disrupted by government policies such as forced relocation, a capitalistic economy and the preaching of Christianity.¹⁷⁵

Even the next generation is affected by these consequences. The young girl attends a residential school and briefly comments on her experience, noting that she was sent back home after a suicide attempt.¹⁷⁶ While she does not provide more context in this chapter, the preceding poem reinforces the connection between the school environment and the girl's deteriorating mental health. The poem's lines explore the suffering of the children ("Who can handle the biggest wound? / Who does not yield to pain or blood? / Poker face birth face rape face")¹⁷⁷ that was too intense for them to endure ("None of us were strong enough / None of us could hang on / To the straight face, the toughness").¹⁷⁸ Instead, the poem demands tender treatment for the children: "We are children / Needing nurture not razor blades."¹⁷⁹

In another poem, while criticizing the system of residential schools ("Eat our puke / Off of a residential school / Dining room floor / Off of the floor of a porn set / Facial punishment all around"),¹⁸⁰ the lyrical subject calls for an urgent "collective shift of consciousness"¹⁸¹ to prevent further harm and suffering. It is not only the past system that

¹⁷⁵ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 76–7.

¹⁷⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 83.

¹⁷⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 82.

¹⁷⁸ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 82.

¹⁷⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 82.

¹⁸⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 160.

¹⁸¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 160.

the poem condemns. The call for a transition in people's perspective extends to the general need to reject colonial stereotypes pervasive throughout society.

A further aspect that undermines the settler-colonizer narrative is the protagonist's decision to reclaim Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit, for herself. The narrator reflects on how the colonizers did not accept the Indigenous language, recalling her mother, who could not use Inuktitut in the past due to its suppression. This experience has left a lasting impact, influencing her daughter, the narrator, as well. The mother no longer wants to speak Inuktitut, so the girl has limited opportunities to practice her language. Though the girl lags behind her peers in commanding the language, she views it as an inseparable part of her that "lives under [her] subconscious."¹⁸²

Language is not merely a medium of communication; it is a tool that can challenge the existing power politics. It is integral to one's identity and represents a confirmation of sovereignty.¹⁸³ The question of language in Indigenous literatures is particularly intricate. As a result of colonization, many communities had to adopt English as the "lingua franca," and contemporary Indigenous authors address this legacy in various ways.¹⁸⁴ Some employ "code-switching" and shift between different languages or styles; some accept writing in English (or French in the Quebec region) or manipulate the language to define themselves against it (for example, by using non-standard variants), while others entirely condemn it as the colonizer's language.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 50.

¹⁸³ Kristina Fagan, "Code-Switching Humour in Aboriginal Literature," in *Across Cultures, Across Borders*, ed. Emma LaRocque, Paul W. DePasquale and Renate Eigenbrod (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2010): 25–6.

¹⁸⁴ Jo-Ann Episkenew, "Myth, Policy, and Health," in *Learn, Teach, Challenge*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 211, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/49036>.

¹⁸⁵ Fagan, "Code-Switching Humour in Aboriginal Literature," 26.

Tagaq herself underscores the importance of the language when she includes an Inuktitut syllabic chart – not as an attachment at the end of the book but within its first quarter.¹⁸⁶ Only a couple of pages later, she presents a nine-line poem written in Inuktitut without an English translation.¹⁸⁷ Tagaq’s form of code-switching is, therefore, only a mild one – except for these two excerpts, the rest of the book is in English. Yet even one poem in Inuktitut awakes the reader’s attention and functions as a memento of the power language has, especially concerning a language which was suppressed by official policies.¹⁸⁸ The poem’s message is accessible only to those who understand Inuktitut. At the same time, the syllabic chart invites others to engage with the language as it is not aimed at Inuktitut speakers. Integration of Inuktitut challenges thus the idea of linguistic domination and extends an opportunity for deeper understanding.

Importantly, none of the scenes in the novel depict the protagonist or Indigenous people as victims. Contrarily, the novel as such asserts Indigenous resilience and agency, exemplified in the story of the main character. While acknowledging her hardships, the narrative presents her as a multifaceted individual who navigates and asserts her identity throughout the novel. Representing the protagonist as a complex character is another means of defying stereotypical and simplified settler-colonizer tropes.

Through the protagonist’s “out-of-body experience,” she explores the connection between her identity and her spirit. Her self temporarily leaves the body to feel a “true state of existence,”¹⁸⁹ which is independent of one’s physique. She understands mortal life as merely “carry[ing] the physical burden of carrying energy forward.”¹⁹⁰ Taking on

¹⁸⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 48.

¹⁸⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 53.

¹⁸⁸ Fagan, “Code-Switching Humour in Aboriginal Literature,” 26.

¹⁸⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 32.

¹⁹⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 112.

a body is only a short-term challenge. However, the *reality* is hidden in the periods before and after life on Earth. Moreover, she understands herself as “a great accumulation of all that lived before.”¹⁹¹ It is the same unity she refers to when she contemplates her pregnancy. Her children are her elders, her equals and her leaders.¹⁹² The spirit is thus much greater than only being of one: it transcends individuality and embodies a collective heritage which aligns with the Inuit belief system.¹⁹³ The protagonist fully embraces her spirituality, which used to be disapproved of in the colonizers’ perspective, without rationalization or explanation.

Moreover, different dimensions of her character are explored through her attention to the environment. She shows several daily rituals. One ritual, “a true joining of flesh to flesh,”¹⁹⁴ encompasses eating raw meat to acquire energy from its freshness. A different ritual, personal to her, means taking care of lemmings. She puts them underneath her tongue where they can rest in darkness, feeds them attentively and lets them burrow through her hair.¹⁹⁵ Both these acts are examples of her nurturing and respectful relationship with nature. The focus on the main heroine, her experiences and relationships, as well as the roundness and complexity of her identity, defies the simplified representation of Indigenous people in settler-colonizer narratives.

The novel further challenges the colonizing narrative through its contribution to storytelling. Historically, colonizers viewed Inuit traditional stories as mere anthropological material.¹⁹⁶ However, in *Split Tooth*, the narrative revisits one of the best-

¹⁹¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 121.

¹⁹² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 133.

¹⁹³ Joe Karetak, Frank Tester and Shirley Tagalik, “[Notes to Chapter 9],” in *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: What Inuit Have Always Known to Be True*, ed. Joe Karetak, Frank Tester and Shirley Tagalik (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2017): 247.

¹⁹⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 26.

¹⁹⁵ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 18–21.

¹⁹⁶ Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 42.

known Inuit tales, the story of Sedna. At the story's conclusion, a new and contemporary layer is added, in which the narrator sharply criticizes the colonizers. She intervenes to warn Sedna against helping humans. According to the narrator, people are already condemned by their greed. This criticism is directed towards the ongoing threat of exploitation in the Arctic, referring to seismic testing, which is used to locate oil and natural gas reserves. The narrator's rhetorical question, "What will Sedna do when she hears the seismic testing?"¹⁹⁷ is transformed into an indirect threat, underscoring the environmental and cultural impact of such industrial activities on the local communities. The story of Sedna thus both reclaims Inuit storytelling traditions and highlights the current dangers coming from the dominant powers.

Through various strategies, *Split Tooth* skillfully dismantles the stereotypes created in the settler-colonizer discourse. The story confronts the injustices inflicted upon Indigenous communities without reducing them to victims. It places Indigenous experiences and perspectives at the forefront while emphasizing that their identities transcend their Indigeneity. For example, the protagonist emerges as a well-rounded character with complex relationships. Another way of asserting the narrative is by incorporating Inuktitut into the novel. Tagaq includes a poem in the Indigenous language, deliberately omitting a translation and thus highlighting the power politics in using languages. Lastly, the novel addresses the topic of storytelling, reclaiming the role of a tradition that was historically understood only as anthropological material. By subverting these stereotypes, *Split Tooth* complies with the expectations of wonderwork.

¹⁹⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 87.

3.3 Imagining Otherwise

The last attribute of the genre of wonderwork is its ability to “imagine otherwise,” depicting different futures that presuppose the possibilities of healing.¹⁹⁸ *Split Tooth* addresses the topic of healing in a multidimensional way. The novel suggests that the cycle of violence must sometimes be broken through violence, and only then can balance and remediation be achieved.¹⁹⁹ A healed present facilitates an *other* future, a future that becomes a decolonization imperative by the very nature of its existence, as the settler-colonizer narrative does not define it.

The protagonist expresses a desire for a hopeful future, searching for a more liberating place than her current one. She compares herself to an untamed and free seagull: “If we acted like seagulls, then perhaps we could transform into them, screaming and soaring. We would fly home.”²⁰⁰ However, though the protagonist finds solace in her imagination, escape is not a solution. She is bound to her land, but she is not left to her own devices. Nature endows her with strength and support.

As the cycle of nature unravels, the Sun counters the Moon, the one who “bullie[s] [others] into submission.”²⁰¹ The Sun is the bearer of life and hope, mighty enough to evict the Moon’s violence. Through its power, the Sun gains ascendancy; it grows stronger and sets life in the Arctic into motion: “Ice will crack / Blood will flow / Sun in Ice.”²⁰² Throughout the story, the girl’s journey mirrors the Sun’s. She gradually accumulates her strength to overcome the oppression she faces.

¹⁹⁸ Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 156.

¹⁹⁹ Martin, “[Review],” 159.

²⁰⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 27.

²⁰¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 76.

²⁰² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 76.

The main character is not alone in this task – two poems in the novel directly engage with the reader, urging them to follow the girl’s path. One poem speaks to hurting people: “(...) living in silence / With violence in your bones / Sorrow in your marrow.”²⁰³ The plea of the lyrical subject sounds powerful as it resembles an incantation, using the performative verb “beg” and simple repetition: “Heal I beg you / Heal I beg you / Heal I beg you / Heal.”²⁰⁴

The second poem is a lyrical meditation on conquering inner struggles. The poem’s voice speaks to the reader, addressing those grappling with oppression that originates from within themselves. The lines warn against holding on to fear as it has damaging potential and can “turn into doubts into words into ideas / into anger into hatred into violence.”²⁰⁵ Amidst this internal turmoil, the poem offers an aid: through introspection and contemplation, one can find a pathway to healing. “Exhale calmness in acknowledgment of the beauty within the courage it takes not to fear love,”²⁰⁶ the poem concludes. However, the healing process is not only harmonious. The lyrical subject gives the reader powerful directives like to “reap eat chew / swallow devour all the goodness and love that is given to you”²⁰⁷ and, on the other hand, encourages to appreciate personal burdens and have “the courage to love small fears.”²⁰⁸ The poem implies that healing involves deep self-acceptance and does not exclude moments of power or violence.

These poems contribute to the theme of “imagining otherwise” by presenting a presupposition for these distinct futures—the process of healing, which includes embracing the complexities of emotions and acknowledging personal burdens. The

²⁰³ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 151.

²⁰⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 151.

²⁰⁵ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 10.

²⁰⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 10.

²⁰⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 10.

²⁰⁸ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 10.

intricate approach to healing is intertwined throughout the novel and challenges the conventional narratives of pain and struggle.

Healing is closely tied to empowerment. In the main character's story, three pivotal moments in different stages of her life influence her sense of agency. The first key scene unfolds when she, as a ten-year-old girl, seeks retribution for the gender-based abuse that has been happening to her. There is a boy who constantly mocks girls, and the protagonist decides to intervene in an act of childish mischief. She and her girlfriends wrestle him to the ground, leaving him in nothing but his underwear and socks. The deed is not aimed only at the boy she dislikes. It is a demonstrative expression of defiance against all the injustices girls and women face. "I think of all the times I have been told I was inferior for being a girl. I think about all the times men have touched me when I didn't want them to. I think about how good it feels to be waving the pants of one of the cocky boys in the air (...),"²⁰⁹ the girl says. Her action is rough; it is one of the examples in which she tries to break the cycle of violence through violence itself.

The second scene occurs with the protagonist as a seventeen-year-old woman. It is a parallel scene to the one described above; through an act of violence, the main character protests against the sexual abuse she was forced to endure. She and her friend go to a house party where she encounters her sexual predator, whose actions still haunt her. "I feel a presence before I feel his touch,"²¹⁰ she comments on meeting him. It is her teacher who repeatedly assaulted her when she was only a pupil. "I'm not six years old anymore,"²¹¹ the narrator says resolutely and asks the man to accompany her outside. It is the first time she is entirely in charge of the situation: "He's pretty drunk and I smile as

²⁰⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 16.

²¹⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 83–4.

²¹¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 84.

I hit him as hard as I can,”²¹² she describes, pushing him down the stairs. Through this violent event, she can feel a release of her emotions: “[W]e escape, tears, laughter, and adrenaline coursing through the night. We are free.”²¹³ By acting upon her feelings and showing that she does not forget or forgive, she firmly stands up for herself.

In the third and last episode, the protagonist is now a mother of two babies. Her violent act is a final one: a murder. In an early passage of the book, the main character says that murder can “restore balance” and “heal if applied sparingly.”²¹⁴ She observes that the actions of pain happen continuously. “Life murders us every day,”²¹⁵ she remarks, noting how human life is intertwined with suffering. Her murder is an attempted killing of her son.

The protagonist’s twins are inherently connected to violence: her daughter can alleviate the pain, while her son can intensify it. However, her son Savik is much stronger than her daughter. “There must be an imbalance of pain in the world,”²¹⁶ she assumes as a result. Savik influences the people around him, attracting those troubled, weakened or filled with negativity. The protagonist’s uncle feels an inexplicable pull towards the baby boy, but the more time he spends with Savik, the quicker his health deteriorates. Savik feeds on the uncle’s dying, absorbing pieces of him.²¹⁷ After the uncle’s death, Savik begins to weaken his grandfather, who, similarly to the uncle, carries negativity in himself. In a desperate attempt to protect her father, the protagonist leaves her home. Despite the pain Savik causes, she loves him dearly: “He is everything that is flawed. He cannot help himself. We all give ourselves to people that cannot help

²¹² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 84.

²¹³ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 84.

²¹⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 33.

²¹⁵ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 33.

²¹⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 139.

²¹⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 168–9.

themselves. How can we not?”²¹⁸ Savik represents the evil that humans, including the protagonist, contain in themselves. Therefore, the mother never blames him; it is not his actions that inflict pain on her loved ones; he “just is”²¹⁹ as a necessary part of the world.

Only when Savik starts to absorb the life energy of the boy the protagonist cares for, the only person who fills her with tenderness instead of violence, does she feel obligated to act.²²⁰ After Savik physically hurts her as well, she knows that “there [is] no room for him on this Earth.”²²¹ If he grows even stronger, he starts feeding on love instead of negativity. On a cold night, she tries to kill him, but he escapes, shapeshifting into a seal and swimming away. However, the terror of her action startles Naja, Savik’s sister, and the baby girl’s heart stops beating. The protagonist thus loses both her babies.²²² After the loss, the woman does not have the will to live. She dies by suicide, being transformed into Lament, riding with the Arctic wind and mourning her children.²²³

By her decision to murder, she tries to alleviate the world from the violence Savik represents and attempts to break the cycle of pain he perpetuates. However, he overpowers her, and the violence ultimately leads to the death of Naja – the representation of healing. This episode complicates everything that *Split Tooth* conveyed about violence and healing so far. The duality of Savik and Naja embodies the inherent conflict within the protagonist herself and the world around her. Though violence and healing conflict, they are also dependent compounds of each other. The failure to kill Savik and the unintended death of Naja instead demonstrate the uncontrollable nature of violence.

²¹⁸ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 170.

²¹⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 176.

²²⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 175.

²²¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 177.

²²² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 180–1.

²²³ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 182–3.

Through these three essential scenes, violence may seem like a necessary act to restore balance, yet at the same time, it can initiate further harm, complicating the journey toward healing. *Split Tooth* thus acknowledges the idea that the path towards imagining and *having* a different future can be trying. Still, the novel leaves the reader with offering a possible resolution.

The potential answer lies on the novel's last page, which presents a short poem. The concluding poem depicts a swift transformation of the lyrical subject, mirroring the young protagonist's progression. The voice of the poem finds herself in various stages, starting with being helpless and fearful. "Protect me,"²²⁴ she pleads, "Fear is driving my flesh machine."²²⁵ The call for help is followed by a request for forgiveness and protection ("Forgive my dark heart"²²⁶ and "Shelter me from myself").²²⁷ Afterwards, the voice calls violence upon herself: "Blacken my eyes so they reflect what I see from the inside."²²⁸ She intensifies her pledge when saying: "Kill me. End this."²²⁹ Throughout the turmoil of the emotions, we can see how she undervalues herself and seeks solace in violence. However, the narrative is changed through another appeal. "Love me. There is still a child inside,"²³⁰ she says cautiously, opening herself again. Her calling for love and acceptance is a first step in her empowerment. Now, her pleas do not undermine her identity. "Wash the blood off. (...) I survive / still. I am stronger now,"²³¹ the voice claims. The penultimate line is no longer beseeching: "Worship me. I am boundless. I stood up. I am

²²⁴ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

²²⁵ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

²²⁶ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

²²⁷ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

²²⁸ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

²²⁹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

²³⁰ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

²³¹ Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

worthy.”²³² She achieves the end of her healing process and is empowered to acknowledge her own value.

If we draw a parallel between the protagonist’s narrative and the poem, this is where the stories divide. In the story, the main character grows into a young, self-assured woman who has decided to disrupt the cycle of violence. Yet, her actions lead to her demise. However, the last line of the poem adds a potential “epilogue” to the story, capturing the wide range of possibilities lying ahead. “Start again,” the novel’s final line says, encouraging the opportunity to imagine otherwise. The closing line underscores the theme of transformation and empowerment, affirming that healing paves the way for a future defined by one’s resilience.

²³² Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 189.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to analyze how Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth* exemplifies the literary genre of wonderwork conceptualized by Daniel H. Justice.

Firstly, the thesis introduced Inuit literature, discussed the topic of "Indigeneity," and presented influential voices of past and current Inuit generations, setting the context for understanding the novel *Split Tooth*. The second chapter defined wonderworks and explained the decolonizing framework, in which it is necessary to distinguish wonderworks from other genres of speculative fiction such as fantasy or magical realism. Moreover, this chapter outlined three main characteristics of a wonderwork: the amalgamation of "the real" and "the unreal" without favouring either, the disruption of stereotypical settler-colonizer tropes, and the depiction of a future distinct from the colonizing narrative. These attributes of wonderworks challenge traditional Western literary conventions and offer a new lens to understand Indigenous literature.

Additionally, the third chapter presented an analysis of *Split Tooth*, employing close reading to explore the essential elements of wonderworks. The novel uses "the real" mode by setting the story in a realistic time and space, narrating the coming-of-age of a young girl from Nunavut. At the same time, the girl encounters "the unreal" by interacting with natural and spiritual forces such as the Northern Lights. In both worlds, the girl experiences abuse and is confronted with a power imbalance. The two modes of existence thus mirror each other, reinforcing the blend of "the real" and "the unreal" into a cohesive narrative.

Moreover, the novel rejects the settler-colonizer imagination and asserts narrative power. It acknowledges the harm inflicted upon Inuit people without portraying them as victims. The story features well-rounded characters with deep spiritual relationships who

defy the stereotypical tropes of settler-colonizer narratives. Lastly, the book explores a pathway toward healing, proposing a new, *other* future at the end of the story. The protagonist's journey redefines the conventional understanding of pain and healing, suggesting that breaking cycles of violence can sometimes be achieved *through* violence itself. By implementing all three characteristics, *Split Tooth* can be understood as wonderwork.

Future research could focus on a comparative study between *Split Tooth* and other Indigenous wonderworks to explore the differences and commonalities within the genre. Another area for further research could be a detailed exploration of the relations between the various forms of *Split Tooth* – prose, poetry and visual art.

Ultimately, *Split Tooth* exemplifies the genre of wonderwork, challenging colonial narratives and envisioning alternative futures. Simultaneously, Tagaq's work is a powerful story of grappling with violence, personal resilience, and empowerment and speaks to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers.

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