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# Tagaq, Tanya, 2018. *Split Tooth*, New York, Viking Press, 189 pages.

Book review by Knut Tjensvoll Kitching<sup>i</sup>

*Split Tooth*, the first work of narrative fiction by the celebrated musician and artist Tanya Tagaq, is a welcome addition to the pantheon of contemporary Inuit literature. Herein, readers interested in the boundary between the Inuit spiritual or mythic tapestry and the mechanics of daily life will find rich material for analysis. For scholars seeking to understand how contemporary Inuit artists describe the ongoing outfall of colonization and life in communities and blend Inuit traditions and narrative tropes with imagery and fundamentally new tools, *Split Tooth* demands attention.

*Split Tooth* roots itself in a long Inuit storytelling tradition by not only bringing the blending of mythic and modern lives to the contemporary audience but also advancing this literary tradition by focusing on the experiences of a young person and engaging with the transition from childhood to adulthood as a site of rich metaphor and scope for comment on the transformations at the heart of contemporary Inuit life in the communities of the Nunangat.

*Split Tooth* describes the life of an adolescent woman in 1970's Nunavut, her travels through the community, and her encounters with different characters, including friends, relatives, and others more malign in intent. We are introduced to the challenges of community life, the stretching of time under the summer sun, and the various diversions of this community's youth : games, drugs, and escape. As the narrator's experiences alter between the violent, the sexual, and the divine (often at the same time), we connect with other characters inhabiting her consciousness, including Fox and the Northern Lights.

The repertoire of Inuit fiction could be said to have begun with Mitiarjuk Naappaluk's *Sanaaq* (1987), with *Split Tooth* marking the birth of a remarkable new voice in this lineage. *Sanaaq* follows the life of the eponymous heroine through 48 episodic windows into camp life in Nunavik during a time of great change, with the arrival of the Qallunaat. While *Sanaaq* broke new stylistic ground using fragments and small windows to shape a narrative, *Split Tooth* is presented as a combination of prose

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interspersed with poetry, with illustrations by Jaime Hernandez. Many of the same themes, such as the family dynamic, the business of living and community life, the presence and origins of powerful emotions of fear and violent anger, and the interrelations of human and animal worlds are present in both *Sanaaq* and *Split Tooth*. Where *Split Tooth* marks profoundly new ground is in its deepening of these relations across human-animal and human-spirit divides by introducing hungers and lusts (a long tradition in Inuit storytelling) that emerge flavoured with magic realism or perhaps allegory. The lens of a narrator who happens to be a young woman just leaving childhood is also a profound contrast. While *Sanaaq* is a meditative reflection on the power of small tasks and the extraordinary repercussions of moments in shaping lives, *Split Tooth* approaches from a different angle by injecting cosmic power into the strange with the scope of a child's imagination. For Tagaq's narrator, very little is small or can be misconstrued as being inconsequential or quiet; this prose-poem is filled with powerful emotion. The power of Tagaq's words is difficult to understate, as it blends a spare yet muscular narrative style that although distinctly tethered to northern traditions is pushed further with vivid imagery.

With the Inquiry into MMIW and the #metoo movement pushing sexual violence, particular in relation to Indigenous women, into the public eye, it's not a stretch to say that *Split Tooth* feels distinctly topical. Sexual relations and coupling across species is a tradition in Inuit storytelling; presenting this to a contemporary literary audience is thus a complex and bold undertaking, particularly through the lens of the sexual experiences of a young woman on the cusp of adulthood. The amorality of desire at the heart of Tagaq's vision is a distinct repudiation of colonial narratives. Violence, lust, consent, and the outfall of these complex forces and emotions in the event of pregnancy are all touched upon as we follow the narrator through her forceful transition into womanhood.

For many readers, *Split Tooth* will most closely resemble the work of Haisla author Eden Robinson (Trickster trilogy) or perhaps that of Cherie Demaline, both of whom, although from very different cultural, literary, and storytelling traditions, are engaged in a similar literary quest to join together the mythical and quotidian worlds. However, these subject matter similarities are largely superficial. The uniquely Inuit elements of Tagaq's transformations are carnal and viscerally embodied in a way that marks a significant difference between Indigenous trickster and transformer traditions and the Inuit storytelling tradition, which has never shied away from blood, bodies, and particularly the sexual inter-relatedness of human and animal worlds.

This proposal of re-enchantment, of re-investing the rich Inuit tradition of transformation and inter-related animal, spiritual, and human worlds into the contemporary Arctic, carries through from much of Tagaq's past artistic practice. As a musician, Tagaq's projects have long focused on interweaving

traditions and forms to describe the hybridity of the contemporary Inuit existence, blending southern forces and Inuit traditions, animal worlds and human societies between the immutable pattern of the seasons and their absence in a 24/7, wifi-enabled indoor reality. There is a compelling argument to be made, which is that *Split Tooth* is above all a story of hybridity, of the interplay between Inuit culture and Qallunaat influences, of the space between human-animal and spiritual realms, between youth and adulthood.

In the world of Inuit literature and particularly the smaller pond of Inuit fiction, *Split Tooth* proposes a web of stories about the social lives of communities with the traditionally crowded realm of tales, myths, and legends. In this regard, *Split Tooth* follows in the footsteps of other significant Inuit works of fiction, while striding into new stylistic territory to address the social and mythological impacts of a period of profound change that continues to daily challenge the lives of contemporary Inuit youth. Tagaq's is a hard voice, pushing these narratives into terrain which is hard, dangerous, eerie, and unprecedented.