

From one colonial language to another: translating Natasha Kanapé Fontaine's "Mes lames de tannage"¹

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Translating into English is always a gesture worth thinking about (Spivak 180-181), and translating the work of an Indigenous writer from French to English in a colonial context such as Canada is even more worthy of pause. As Kathryn Batchelor points out, the translation from one colonial language into another often brings with it the loss or forgetting of the writer's specific relationship to the first colonial language. In her terms, "there is an overwhelming tendency for the linguistic complexities of the original texts to be diminished in translation, whatever the language pairing" (250).² In referencing postcolonial studies in translation, I do not want to draw facile comparisons between the situation of former European colonies and that of Indigenous nations. I take my lead from those in the field of Indigenous literary studies who argue convincingly that Indigenous literatures are not postcolonial (Archibald-Barber 14; King 184-185) and who focus instead on processes of decolonization (Justice 150-152; Maracle, *I am Woman* xii; Simpson 141-142). At the same time, I want to acknowledge the thinking prompted by the translation of writers working in languages that have been, and continue to be, used to dominate and dispossess them. In the field of Indigenous literatures, writers and scholars have voiced concern about translation from Indigenous languages into English.³ They have also noted how "Indigenous concepts, rhythms, accents, and forms" can reinvigorate English (Cariou 35) and how English can offer writers "cultural and ideological possibilities" (Sinclair 210). Among writers and scholars who focus on Indigenous literature in French, there is growing attention to the relationship of writers to the French language. Drawing on ground-breaking work by Michèle Lacombe⁴ and Sarah Henzi on translation and self-translation from Indigenous languages into French, the present essay analyses the translation into English of a French-language work by Innu writer Natasha Kanapé Fontaine.

In translating Kanapé Fontaine's slam poem "Mes lames de tannage"⁵ from one colonial language into another, it is important to keep in mind how she inhabits French and what it means to

¹ A preliminary draft of this paper was presented at the 2017 conference "La traduction transculturelle et interlinguistique : s'y perdre et s'y retrouver / Lost and Found in Transcultural and Interlinguistic Translation." I would like to thank the organizers for this opportunity and the International Research Training Group, IRTG - Diversity (SSHRC) for funding my participation. I am very grateful to Sarah Henzi for her support in this project.

² Batchelor is surveying studies on the translation of African writers who write in a European language and inflect that language "with vocabulary or turns of phrase native to their own cultures and languages" (248).

³ On mistranslation, see Maracle "Indigenous Poetry" 308; on translatability, see Sinclair 210; and on what is lost, see Mercredi 21.

⁴ Lacombe identifies as "French (Acadian and Québécois) and Maliseet (Malécite)" (178 n.6).

⁵ See natashakanapefontaine.com for the original version of the slam; see *Canadian Literature*, vol. 230-231, 2016, pp. 86-89 for my English translation (printed alongside the French).

translate her French into English. One of the decolonizing gestures of Kanapé Fontaine's writing is to make her maternal language *Innu-aimun* present and palpable even though she is writing in French. In her collections of poetry and in many of her slams,⁶ for example, words from *Innu-aimun* interrupt the French and open alternative spaces of knowledge. In "Mes lames de tannage," there are no words in *Innu-aimun*, perhaps because this slam is a relatively early one, signed and posted to the internet on July 6, 2012, or perhaps because of its direct address to a specifically settler audience. In this essay, however, I am exploring the hypothesis that the slam finds other ways of making Innu language and culture felt, and of marking the speaker's de/colonial relationship to French. The challenge is to translate the slam into English without losing sight of these strategies and relationships. In what follows, I revisit my translation of "Mes lames de tannage" (Moyes 86-89). Although the translation is accompanied by my "Notes toward a translation" (89-105), there are several issues I was not able to discuss, notably the role of translation, the stakes of this translation, the choice to publish the French alongside the English, and the strategies I adopted for translating the slam's poetic language.

Kanapé Fontaine is of a generation of Indigenous writers in Quebec who write in French. Her maternal language is *Innu-aimun* but she moved from her community of Pessamit at the age of five and was raised in French in Baie-Comeau. In a prose piece titled "Ma parole rouge sang," Kanapé Fontaine addresses her relationship both to *Innu-aimun* and to French. She recounts how at the age of sixteen she saw a video of her fifth birthday party in which she was speaking "another language" (24). Thanks to this video, she writes, she does not lose her first language. At the age of sixteen she has forgotten it, and will struggle to relearn it (Kanapé Fontaine and Bécharde 92), but she does not lose it. Seeing the video, however, changes her relationship to French.⁷ And although words from *Innu-aimun* play an increasingly important role in her poetry, French remains her principal language of composition. In her terms,

N'ayant qu'une seule arme, ma maîtrise de la langue française, je ne pouvais faire autrement que de répondre à l'appel de cette entité qui me dépassait, qui me dépasse encore, et qui me dépassera toujours. Je dis bien "ma maîtrise," car là d'où je viens, le français est une langue seconde. Très facultative. L'anglais vient loin derrière. (24)

Although my work was to translate her slam into English, it is Kanapé Fontaine's construction of French I find compelling and want to explore here. Also compelling is her emphasis upon the firstness of *Innu-aimun*. For her, each language resonates with the territory it belongs to and French takes second place: French is the language of her education, a language she inhabits poetically but does not possess. Kanapé Fontaine makes French the "other" language but also, and interestingly, the language through which she defines herself as Innu. As the language in which colonial relations

⁶ See for example, videos of the slams "Pour que nous puissions VIVRE," "We Will Rise (Nous Nous Soulèverons)" and "Marche des peuples #3."

⁷ "Sans cette vidéocassette, mon rapport à la langue française n'aurait pas été le même. Si j'avais perdu ma langue, je n'aurais pas appréhendé les choses de la même manière" ("Ma parole" 24).

have been enacted and processed, French is the language in which she can negotiate those relations and return sovereignty to herself.⁸ In *Kuei, je te salue: conversation sur le racisme*, she recounts how her return to Pessamit gave her a sense of belonging, and importantly, how a member of her community helped her to realize that she did not need to speak her language in order to be recognized, and recognize herself, as Innu (Kanapé Fontaine and Bécharde 79).

Writers and scholars increasingly conceive of the field of Indigenous literature in terms that traverse linguistic and national boundaries, and this makes translation key to the collective process of decolonization. Wendat scholar Guy Sioui Durand, for example, insists on the importance for Indigenous culture of French-language translations of English-language work. To be an Indigenous writer in Quebec, he suggests in a review of Maurizio Gatti's *Être écrivain amérindien au Québec*, is to be interested in Indigenous writing whatever the language (184-185).⁹ For Sioui Durand, Indigenous writers working in French are not waiting to be a part of Quebec letters. They belong to a broader category of Indigenous literatures that has no stake in dividing literatures along lines of language within a Eurocentric framework of nationalism, French-language works on one shelf and English-language works on another.

In practical terms, translation allows Indigenous artists who use French or English to reach out and make links with each other. This goal of dialogue is at the heart of a special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* initiated by Lacombe and Heather MacFarlane. Taking as a point of departure the idea that texts in French can be read alongside texts in English rather than studied separately, the essays in this special issue explore how Indigenous writers overcome language barriers through the use of Indigenous languages and the renegotiation of codes. Isabelle St-Amand, in her contribution, argues that strategies of reading developed in English-language contexts across North America are relevant to the work of Indigenous writers in French. In his "Afterword," Ojibway poet and scholar Armand Garnet Ruffo recounts the experience of a reading tour in Australia where it was easier to communicate with Indigenous writers from the other side of the world than with fellow Innu writer Rita Mestokosho. Hearing Mestokosho read in Innu and in French, in a context where the shared language was English, made him aware of the need to foster links at a local level as well as internationally. Ruffo also recounts how "a door opened" for him as he worked through Gatti's French-language anthology *Littérature amérindienne du Québec* (111).

The work of translating Kanapé Fontaine's "Mes lames de tannage" was inspired in part by a desire to facilitate such openings.¹⁰ As a white settler-scholar trained in the field of women's writing

⁸ Kanapé Fontaine's text is intercalated with a text by writer and publisher Rodney Saint-Éloi which opens with the epigraph "En Haïti, le français, langue des maîtres, a été associé à la dépossession, à l'aliénation. Mais il a été aussi une voie d'émancipation" (23).

⁹ Sioui Durand mentions translations of writing by N. Scott Momaday, Tomson Highway, Louise Erdrich and Joseph Boyden.

¹⁰ I began translating excerpts into English for a paper I was delivering at the 2015 meeting of the GKS, the Association of Canadian Studies in German-speaking countries. Encouraged by the enthusiasm for Kanapé Fontaine's work, I translated the entire slam. In July 2016, I participated in a roundtable discussion with Kanapé Fontaine and her publisher

in French and English, I am interested in the relations that organize fields of literature, especially fields that bring together works in different languages. I want to listen to the specificity of Kanapé Fontaine’s French-language poetry and to resist normalizing or flattening it in the translation from French to English. At the same time, I have to recognize the limitations of this project: my inability to hear traces of *Innu-aimun* in her writing, the absence of Indigenous contributors to my translation project,¹¹ and the colonial blinkers of my history as a Scottish immigrant whose strategy for finding some sense of belonging to this place was to study its literatures—in English and in French. Given these limitations, I want to follow the example of Renate Eigenbrod in acknowledging my project’s “positionality of non-authority” (143). It would be better for an Innu poet to carry out the translation of writing such as Kanapé Fontaine’s; but, as Lacombe argues, where this is not possible, academics have a role to play “in promoting the work of translation” (161).¹² This need to promote the translation of Indigenous literatures is especially urgent in a funding context that has privileged debate among Euro-Canadians at the expense of debate among Indigenous peoples (Lacombe, MacFarlane, and Andrews 7; Lacombe 165).

In spite of inadequate resources, translation is playing an increasing role in the field of Indigenous letters. As Sarah Henzi observes in the news piece “Littératures autochtones et traduction,” the last few years have seen the publication of French translations of several Anglophone Indigenous writers with *Mémoire d’encrier* and Hannenorak;¹³ and English translations of several Francophone Indigenous writers with Mawenzi House, Arsenal Pulp Press and Freehand Books. Henzi also notes the publication of bilingual (French-English) anthologies with Banff Press and Possibles Éditions. This activity, she observes, offers readers a corpus of Indigenous literature that is genuinely transnational (n.p.). French translations of English-language texts, published in France, have been circulating for a number of years, so what is especially striking here is the increase since 2013¹⁴ in translations of French-language texts into English, as well as the publication in Quebec¹⁵ of translations into French. Whereas Indigenous writing and thinking in English has shaped the field of Indigenous literatures, the increase in the number of translations from French to

at *Mémoire d’encrier*, Rodney Saint-Éloi, where I spoke publicly about the implications of translating from one colonial language to another. Over the course of the roundtable, I received Kanapé Fontaine’s permission to publish the translation and to write about the slam in a special issue of *Canadian Literature* devoted to “Indigenous Literature and the Arts of Community.” In 2018, the producers of a short CBC documentary on Kanapé Fontaine asked permission to use the translation to subtitle her performance of “Mes lames de tannage” for an English-speaking audience (Mehchi and Fiorito).

¹¹ I tried to involve Kanapé Fontaine in the process but it was at a time when she was travelling and too busy. It meant a great deal to me that she looked to the English translation in *Canadian Literature* to subtitle her slam for the CBC documentary “Art is My Country” (Mehchi and Fiorito).

¹² See, for example, Henzi’s forthcoming English translation of two works by Innu writer An Antan Kapesh with Wilfrid Laurier UP.

¹³ Hannenorak is an Indigenous publishing house run by Daniel and Jean Sioui in Wendake.

¹⁴ Josephine Bacon’s *Message Sticks*, published with Mawenzi House, is a landmark in translation from French into English.

¹⁵ The publication of Taiaiake Alfred’s *Paix, pouvoir et droiture : un manifeste autochtone* with Hannenorak in 2014 marks a turning point in translations from English into French.

English will have the important effect of sharing French-language Indigenous thought, both creative and critical. It will also facilitate the cross-language, interdisciplinary initiatives proposed by Lacombe, MacFarlane, and Andrews (9).

The translation of “Mes lames de tannage” is part of the wave of translations from French into English. Given the increase in the number of such translations and the fact that many of the translators are settlers unfamiliar with the Indigenous language spoken by the French-language writer being translated, it is important to reflect collectively on what is at stake in the process.¹⁶ At stake, I believe, is the question of Indigenous languages. Kanapé Fontaine does not simply write in French. Nor is she translating from *Innu-aimun*. As she makes clear in “Ma parole,” her relationship to language is far more complex and textured. Whereas writers such as Josephine Bacon and Rita Mestokosho write in *Innu-aimun* (or in French), translate their work, and publish in bilingual editions, “Mes lames de tannage” holds all of these relationships in tension in its French-language poetry. Indeed, Kanapé Fontaine recounts how members of her community have told her they are able to hear in her work traces of the rhythms and syntactic patterns of *Innu-aimun* (Kanapé Fontaine, Saint-Éloi, and Moyes). In other words, even when a work is written in a European language, there is a relationship to the Indigenous language.¹⁷

The poetic practice of an Indigenous writer working in French, marking the difference of her relationship to it, and using her French-language poetry to explore her Innu culture and language is not one that has received a lot of scholarly attention. At the same time, there are related studies that support my reading of Kanapé Fontaine’s slam. Henzi cites a conversation between Bacon and Pierre Gill that discusses French as “un mal nécessaire” for Innu writers (Bacon “Interview” 32; Henzi “Francophone Aboriginal Literature” 659-664). This idea of “a necessary evil” helps explain the ambivalence Kanapé Fontaine expresses in “Ma parole” with regard to French: its status for her as an “arme de déconstruction massive contre le colonialisme” and of “reconstruction massive” (25). Both Lacombe and Henzi cite Tomson Highway’s self-translated Cree versions of plays he had previously published in English. Highway’s thinking about language is helpful for understanding the emotion behind Kanapé Fontaine’s use of French. His assertions about the frustration and anger that come with being forced to write in a language that is not one’s maternal language (“Préface” 7), along with his explanation that his plays came to him originally in Cree, bring to the surface the conflictual relations between Indigenous languages and European languages (“Préface” 8; “Tomson Highway Releases Plays in Cree” n.p.). Although Kanapé Fontaine is not translating from *Innu-aimun*, the latter is her maternal language and, as she makes clear in “Ma parole,” she speaks French because she did not have a choice (25).

¹⁶ Toward this end, Lacombe encourages translators to publish comments or notes on their process alongside their translations (177).

¹⁷ The work of Renate Eigenbrod supports this point: “Even if the Indigenous language is no longer known, an Indigenous author’s awareness of the presence of an Indigenous language will influence the choice of language as a strategy” (142). Eigenbrod cites Margery Fee’s observation that “Indigenous English derives its nature also from the discourse conventions of the Indigenous language, lost or not” (142).

In my search to understand the relationship between the French of Kanapé Fontaine’s slam and her maternal language, I am reminded of a story told by Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong about a reading by a Mi’kmaq poet¹⁸ at the En’owkin Centre / International School of Writing. Because the audience for the reading did not for the most part know Mi’kmaq, the poet translated his work into English; but he did so “poetically” rather than “word for word” (Armstrong 144). The result was a poem “he could not have achieved . . . if he had started from English” (Armstrong 144-145). What I find especially suggestive in Armstrong’s story is the idea that a poem by an Indigenous writer might be shared in a European language, yet have its origins in an Indigenous language and worldview. The story allows for the possibility that Kanapé Fontaine’s French-language writing has roots in—and finds its sense of poetry in—her maternal language. Indeed, she explains in “Ma parole” how writing poetry became an urgent necessity with the rediscovery of her Innu identity and the realization that she had nearly lost her Innu language (24). Unlike the Mi’kmaq poet at the reading, Kanapé Fontaine is composing in a European language. However, Armstrong’s reference to the Mi’kmaq poet’s strategy of working “poetically” shows how important it is to listen poetically to Kanapé Fontaine’s French. Therein lies a connection to her Innu language and culture.

Given that European languages are implicated in a colonial project of eradicating Indigenous languages (Lacombe, MacFarlane, and Andrews 6), it is significant that Armstrong sees in the story of the Mi’kmaq poet translating himself into English, a sign that Indigenous literatures “will grow, . . . will be appreciated not just by [the] internal group but by others worldwide” (145). Ruffo makes a related point. For him, the fact that the majority of Indigenous writers in Canada work either in English or French “has to do with centuries of colonization, the loss of language, and the intergenerational impact of the residential school experience, but it also has to do with Native writers wanting their work to reach as wide an audience as possible” (113). The language in which a literary text is written, then, is an effect of colonization but also of writerly agency, of wanting to create a broad interpretive community. As Stuart Christie explains:

English, along with Spanish and French, is the most effective lingua franca available to North American indigenous artists when linking their particular experiences of anticolonial struggle to the imaginings and representations of other indigenous North American groups outside a given indigenous culture and language. (81)

In Christie’s characterization, European languages can serve to build solidarity among Indigenous artists by allowing for connection without intruding on “sovereign traditions and languages” (82). Kanapé Fontaine’s French-language text—and its English-language translation—can be read in these terms: they have the potential to make the activist writing of Kanapé Fontaine’s slams more available to other Indigenous peoples as well as to a wider community of interested readers.

Publications in more than one language play an important role in the field of Indigenous literatures. The *Meridiano 105* translation project, for example, aims to translate the poetry of

¹⁸ The poet remains unnamed in Armstrong’s story.

Indigenous women¹⁹ “into as many other indigenous American languages as possible and using English, French, or Spanish wherever needed” (195). The poems in this cooperative on-line anthology are available to readers in more than one language and in this way underscore the co-existence of languages. For coordinators Claudia Lucotti and Maria Antonieta Rosas, the process of women poets translating themselves and each other tells a story of “suppleness, of being used to inhabiting places of linguistic instability” (197). This linguistic instability, which is also the lived experience of many of the Indigenous writers and scholars I cite in this essay, helps explain why I did not simply publish an English-language version of Kanapé Fontaine’s “Mes lames de tannage.” Although neither of the languages of the text published in *Canadian Literature* is Indigenous, the choice to publish in two languages instead of one has the effect of destabilizing readers. And to borrow the words of Lucotti and Rosas, it offers “a range of linguistic possibilities that challenge the notion of languages operating in clear-cut cultural, national, and linguistic niches” (198-202). Translation, in the context of *Meridiano 105*, is not a one-way passage into or between European languages. Insofar as it takes the form of a multi-directional network intended to bring Indigenous languages to the fore, the on-line anthology allows me to imagine that a translation of “Mes lames de tannage” into English might eventually enable translation into an Indigenous language.

As a slam, “Mes lames de tannage” is an ephemeral form published on-line in various versions and under various titles, some performed and some written down,²⁰ so it made sense to give readers of the translation the specific French version I was working with. What is more, the French version had not appeared in print, and I did not want the English version to stand in its place as the only print version. In Canada, the English language has a history of imperialism in relation to other languages, and a persistent sense of monolingualism²¹ in spite of legislated French-English bilingualism. The legislated monolingualism of French in Quebec also needs to be taken into account here. The layout of the translation in *Canadian Literature* disrupts the logic of one language. In addition to allowing languages that are usually kept separate to cohabit the page, the layout generates movement. Whereas bilingual texts often rely on the mirroring effect of the original on one page and the translation on the other, the translation of “Mes lames de tannage” alternates a line in French and a line in English. In this way, a reader can read the slam in French by following the left margin, or in English by following the offset, or move back and forth. And, at the same time, that reader might be reminded of the movement—and disturbance—of colonization.²²

¹⁹ Including Rita Mestokosho, Buffy St. Marie, Marilyn Dumont and Louise Halfe (Lucotti and Rosas 196).

²⁰ For performances, see Kanapé Fontaine, “Slam de poésie-2” and 99%media et al., “Je ne resterai pas une crise d’Oka”; the transcription of the slam that appears at the end of the latter performance is titled “L’âme en tannage.” See Moyes 102 n.6 for the various Internet addresses of the slam.

²¹ Yasemin Yildiz’ *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* argues that multilingualism was the norm until the rise of nationalism in late eighteenth-century Europe. Although her concept of monolingualism is helpful, the notion of “beyond the mother tongue” is not relevant to Indigenous writers whose maternal languages have been rendered fragile by state suppression (and oppression) and who do not inhabit “the postmonolingual condition” Yildiz analyses.

²² As Eigenbrod points out, there is a difference between the movement of Indigenous peoples in the pre-contact context and the displacements and relocations imposed by colonization (122).

In broad terms, the layout of the slam as it appears in *Canadian Literature* had to do with recognizing *both* French and English as colonial languages. Yet the layout also diagrams the tensions and contradictions inherent in this recognition. Just as the focus on French and English reminds readers that there is a language missing, it is also possible to argue that *Innu-aimun* is present insofar as it shapes the speaker's relationship to the European languages on the page. What is more, the two European languages are complicit in suppressing the use of Indigenous languages and, at the same time, are potential facilitators of connection among Indigenous writers and scholars. The movement back and forth between French and English might be read as an emblem of parity or equivalence between the two languages yet in Canada there is a history of uneven relations between them. The latter relations are the focus of an important body of translation scholarship but, for the purposes of this essay, I concentrate on scholarship that bears upon Indigenous literatures. As Kathy Mezei, Sherry Simon, and Louise von Flotow observe: "While asymmetries are present in the exchange between English and French, they occur even more glaringly in the case of First Nations languages" (17).²³

The relations among languages are complicated by the history in Canada of double colonization, the fact that the cession of New France to Britain in 1763 brought about the colonization of Quebec as well as the further colonization of Indigenous nations (Kalant 110-112). As Lacombe, MacFarlane, and Andrews point out, this history continues to have an impact on Indigenous languages and cultures:

In a context in which English represents the dominant discourse and French is simultaneously celebrated by some and resented by others, Indigenous writers who use French rather than English find themselves in an especially complex situation, experiencing double marginalization. (6)²⁴

Given the layered relationship of the French and English languages in Canada's history, it is important to keep in sight both the differences *and the continuities* in their positions. In this regard, MacFarlane observes helpfully that "Aligning these two colonial powers is controversial since French speakers have long had to struggle for their own rights in an English-language dominated society" (98). At the same time, she observes, "as far as Native peoples are concerned, both English and French presences are colonial" (98). From an Indigenous perspective, then, "double colonization" refers to the effects of repeated and ongoing colonizations.

Kanapé Fontaine and others have written about the overlapping struggles of Indigenous peoples and Francophones in Quebec. Innu educator Marcelline Kanapé, for example, explains that in an environment dominated by French and English, the Innu language is threatened. This makes

²³ Mezei, Simon, and von Flotow refer here to asymmetries in relations between Indigenous languages and English or French. Their collection includes six essays addressing Indigenous voices in translation.

²⁴ As MacFarlane notes, "It is very difficult, for example, for Franco-Indigenous writers to access programs designed almost entirely for English-speakers" (98).

the Innu people sensitive to the situation of Francophones; yet the reverse, she finds, is not necessarily the case: the projects of the Quebec nation do not always allow for those of Indigenous nations. In this context, Kanapé argues for the right of every nation to fight for its language and culture (n.p.). Kanapé Fontaine characterizes French as a colonial language. Anticipating the response that French is a language colonized by the British, she explains that discrimination and racism have many sources, including the colonial attitudes of the first conquerors of the lands now known as Quebec, attitudes which persist to this day.²⁵ In *Kuei*, she writes at length about what has been shared in the histories of Indigenous peoples and Francophones, including their resistance to the British Empire; but she also observes that, with increasing self-affirmation, the Québécois have become colonizers toward Indigenous peoples (45).

Literary scholars have also addressed the implications of double colonization. For St-Amand, Indigenous writers working in French in Quebec share the historical, political, and cultural conditions lived by Indigenous peoples across Canada and, at the same time, write and publish within the specific cultural and political context of Quebec. She describes this situation as one of “double exiguity”:

d’une part, les barrières linguistiques issues de la colonisation compliquent les échanges avec le milieu littéraire autochtone d’expression anglaise en Amérique du Nord; d’autre part, l’exiguïté du marché francophone diminue les possibilités de production et de diffusion, ainsi que la masse possible de discours critiques. (31)

In her attention to the language barrier between Indigenous writers who work in French and those who work in English, St-Amand highlights the need for translation. Henzi takes the question a step further by making a distinction between the position of Aboriginal peoples in Quebec and that of the Québécois:

[T]he notions of being usurped, occupied, and dispossessed are valid in both cases; but the meaning they convey is extremely different. In no way do Aboriginal peoples in Quebec have either the governance or the political concertation . . . that the Québécois do. Quite the opposite, since Quebec still actively colonizes Aboriginal peoples within its claimed territorial borders. (“Francophone Aboriginal Literature” 658-659)

The exiguity of Indigenous languages, in this context, is not the same as the exiguity of the French language.

Recent work in the field is increasingly attentive to the question of French as a language that colonizes as well as a language that has actively resisted colonization. In a 2017 interview, Jean-

²⁵ “Ils diront que la langue française a été colonisée par la langue anglaise. Les Britanniques ont apporté le système colonialiste comme d’autres s’y sont greffés uniformément. La discrimination et le racisme ne proviennent pas seulement de l’ignorance. Ils proviennent autant de l’attitude colonialiste transmise par les premiers conquérants de ces terres magnifiques et vierges, attitude que beaucoup portent encore sans s’en rendre compte” (“Ma parole” 25).

François Létourneau emphasizes the way Indigenous literatures reframe and reimagine the French language. Without claiming the latter literatures for Quebec letters, he concludes:

Les écrivains des Premiers Peuples nous obligent également à réfléchir au caractère colonial du français, ce qui est un renversement de perspectives étonnant pour un Québécois francophone. Ce phénomène nous amène à réfléchir au passé paradoxal des Québécois, un peuple à la fois colonisateur et colonisé. Prendre conscience de ces paradoxes ne peut qu'être positif pour une société. (Létourneau and Deslandes n.p.)

One of the challenges of translating an Innu writer from French to English is not to lose sight of these paradoxes, indeed, to make them available for readers to explore further. If, as St-Amand points out, Francophone universities in Quebec have been slow to implement programs in the study of Indigenous literatures (30), it is in part because of the difficulty of negotiating these paradoxes.

Early in this essay, I emphasized the role of translation in enabling dialogue. But translation is also integral to colonization, a “condition and effect of asymmetrical relations of power” (Conisbee Baer 233) and, in a Canadian context, “a gauge of a given society’s treatment of, and reaction to, the ‘other’ culture” (Kouostas 1123). While it is not my purpose here to analyse the role of translation in colonization, it is important to recognize the imbrication of translation, power, and the production of knowledge. As Sophie McCall demonstrates in her work on told-to narratives, translators act as “mediating figures” that shape the processes of telling as well as of textualization (*First Person Plural* 9). Although Kanapé Fontaine’s slam was posted to the Internet by her in written form—and was textualized by her—it is also a spoken form,²⁶ written to be performed. In this sense, it is susceptible to appropriation, to decisions that can erase the terms and contingencies of its speaking (McCall, “1997” 431). Given my role in translating the slam and seeing it into print in *Canadian Literature*, I felt an ethical responsibility to place Kanapé Fontaine’s text first and to foreground her name as author.²⁷ In retrospect, however, I see that such a publication also has certain effects. For example, it positions “Mes lames de tannage” as literature, as a poem in the pages of a scholarly journal, and risks losing sight of its presence and impact as a slam, an intervention on the part of an embodied speaker on a given terrain, whether online or at marches and demonstrations. For these reasons, I was at pains in “Notes toward a Translation” to make the links between Kanapé Fontaine’s words and her activism.

There is more to be said, however, about the translation strategies I adopted and about Kanapé Fontaine’s relationship both to the settlers addressed in her slam and to the French language. As she explains to Alice Lefilleul, one of the larger questions that preoccupies her is:

Comment les Premières Nations et les Québécois peuvent-ils habiter sur le même territoire?
Que fait-on de nos luttes environnementales? On a beau dire: “Je ne veux pas de ça, d’En-

²⁶ For further discussion of orality, sound, voice and ancestral memory, see Marcoux 75-76.

²⁷ On the question of authorship, especially of academics claiming sole authorship, see McCall, *First Person Plural* 2; Cardinal 280.

bridge, etc.,” mais que fait-on avec les gens qui habitent là et qui vivent simplement leur vie?
(n.p.)

In raising the question of how First Nations and Québécois can live in the same territory, Kanapé Fontaine is inviting her interlocutors to work together and make common cause. As a Quebec spokesperson for Idle No More, she is committed to transforming the arenas of the social and political to allow Indigenous peoples to take their rightful place. And she is committed to demonstrating in peaceful ways in order to break with the legacy of violence associated with the events of 1990 at Kanehsatake and Kahnawake (“Poétique” n.p.). This is also clear in “Mes lames de tannage”:

Je ne suis pas une peau à vendre une nation à suspendre
Sur le mur d’un salon! Je te le dis tout de suite :
Je ne resterai pas une Crise d’Oka enfermée dans un livre d’histoire de toute façon.²⁸

Although the translation—“I am not a skin for sale, a nation to nail / on a living room wall”—, takes into account the abundant use of alliteration in the French text, there is nothing in English that can do justice to the double entendre of “une crise [crisse] d’Oka.” Drawn from the rich possibilities of spoken French in Quebec, this pun reminds readers that the slam is inscribed in an oral culture that the speaker shares with other Francophones. As a form of profanity, “crisse” expresses the speaker’s anger and frustration that Oka still stands as a measure of relations between First Nations and the people of Quebec.

A key question in translating “Mes lames de tannage” into English is how to sustain the productive tension between peace and anger, contestation and cohabitation. Just as Kanapé Fontaine raises the question, in interviews and lectures, of how to live on the same land and how to link peoples who are in a state of discord (“Poétique” n.p.), her slam plays out these questions in its figurative language, syntax and modes of address. Using all the resources of an oral form, the speaker interrogates her settler interlocutors²⁹ (“Qui es-tu?... / Pourquoi me demandes-tu d’où je viens”³⁰); confronts them with their own brutal truths (Enterre-toi les épreuves de mon holocauste et de mes derniers vestiges territoriaux)³¹; announces her resistance (Au nord de ma famine mes barricades se feront revendications)³²; and sings her interlocutors to sleep (Et si tu dors, c’est parce que mes chants de paix auront été tes berceuses).³³ The speaker demands that the public recognize her (Connais et

²⁸ “I’m telling you right now / I will not remain an Oka crisis shut away in a history book in any case” (Moyes 88-89).

²⁹ For the most part, the speaker’s words are addressed to settlers but in some moments, through the use of the first person plural, they also potentially engage her own people: “Ne regardons plus en arrière mais regardons en avant”; “Let’s stop looking back and rather look ahead” (Moyes 88).

³⁰ “Who are you?... / Why do you ask me where I come from” (Moyes 86).

³¹ “Bury yourself the struggles of my holocaust and the last remains of my land” (Moyes 86); for discussion of this formulation, see Moyes 94-96.

³² “North of my hunger my roadblocks will be claims!” (Moyes 88).

³³ “And if you sleep, it is because my songs of peace will have been your lullaby” (Moyes 89).

reconnais mon droit d'expression je t'en prierai)³⁴; but in spite of doing everything in her power to establish and maintain the contact, it is not clear she will be heard (Mais tu ne portes même une oreille à tes enfants tachés d'un carré de sang. . .).³⁵

“Carré de sang” is a reference to the square of red felt worn by Quebec students protesting a rise in tuition fees in Spring 2012, students who were known as the “carrés rouges.” Insofar as the students themselves projected the assertion onto the front of a government building “Les étudiants ici, on en a rien à crisser,”³⁶ Kanapé Fontaine’s speaker has a right to worry. Through the reference to the “carré de sang,” she forges an alliance with those fighting for social change in Quebec, an alliance reiterated in the red feathers worn by protesters (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) at the Idle No More demonstrations in Quebec early in 2013 (Moyes 100-102). Here again, there is evidence—in the slam and in the political actions it references³⁷—of a will to create a space of cohabitation and collaboration.

The French language is itself a (troubled) space of cohabitation and collaboration for Kanapé Fontaine. Given that her slam uses the reference to the “carré de sang” to break down the us and them paradigm within a political struggle specific to Quebec, I chose not to translate “carré.” Also un-translated is the Quebec motto in the lines “Alors ne t'étonne pas si je te rappelle que JE-ME-SOUVIENS / Je me souviendrai à l'évidence.”³⁸ Here the speaker inhabits the motto parodically, voicing indignation at the ways the Innu language and culture have been torn from the land in the interests of forestry, mining, hydro-electricity and other industries. In Quebec, saying “I remember” *in French* is a gesture of agency and collective self-affirmation. When an Indigenous woman says it, she appropriates that gesture for herself and demands respect for the Innu language and culture. By leaving “je-me-souviens” in French, the translation retains the tension between forms of resistance that Indigenous peoples have shared with the Québécois and forms of resistance that have brought the two into conflict. In the case of “carré” and “je-me-souviens,” non-translation is a strategy for underlining common ground (including the need to inhabit the same territory) and for underlining the contestation that comes with very different ways of inhabiting that territory.

If the first few lines of “Mes lames de tannage” confront the settler with the colonial logic of birthright and belonging, the fourth line dramatically shifts ground (Territoire... Territerre terrimaterre terrirame terrame terripagaie-moi). In the interests of creating a moment in the English translation where the settler-translator recedes and only the voice of the Innu woman writer can be

³⁴ “Know and acknowledge my right to speak I would ask you” (Moyes 88).

³⁵ “But you don’t even listen to your children stained with a carré of blood” (Moyes 88).

³⁶ “Students here, we don’t care [give a shit] about them” (n.p.); Benoît Melançon uses this projection as an example of the use of “crisser” as a verb.

³⁷ Kanapé Fontaine composed “Mes lames de tannage” in the months following the 2012 student strikes and before the demonstrations of Idle No More. As she explains to Lefilleul, she wrote most of her slams before the movement started and has not found it as easy to write slams since that moment; in her words, “Comme si le mouvement lui-même suffisait à dire ce que j’espérais”; “as if the movement itself said what I wanted to say” (n.p.).

³⁸ “So don’t be surprised if I remind you that je-me-souviens / I will remember incontestably” (Moyes 86-87).

heard, I left this line un-translated.³⁹ The movement between French and English stops at this point to focus on a line that sounds like French *but is not entirely French*. An Anglophone reader might slow down and sound it out; a Francophone reader might wonder why it had not been translated and take a closer look. The use of neologisms, Gabrielle Marcoux suggests, underlines the insufficiency of the French language to convey Kanapé Fontaine's cultural reality (71-72). The non-translation into English, in turn, underlines the insufficiency of the English language to capture all that is suggested by Kanapé Fontaine's French. The series of recombined words that follow "territoire" have the effect of refusing colonial notions of territory. In other words, territory here is no longer mapped out and susceptible to distant possession. It is part of and proximate to the speaker (terrimaterre). And, in keeping with traditional Innu practices of travelling throughout the interior by canoe and coming down to the St Lawrence valley for short periods, it has the potential—via a word with Malay origins (pagayer)—to transport her (terripagaie-moi). In a related image from "Ma parole," Kanapé Fontaine compares herself, in her late teens, to a small bark or boat. Her "poetic turn" takes hold of her like a sudden squall but also carries her, transports her, as she learns to navigate for herself (24).

The decision not to translate, like that of including the French original, has a number of effects,⁴⁰ not the least of which is to highlight the mediating work of the translator. In disrupting the English version, the translation brings the reader back to the ways Kanapé Fontaine's slam disrupts French. And, in the refusal to provide an equivalent, there is the suggestion that translation has the potential to fail. Consider the sequence "je suis zèbre de langue et couleurs de peaux / Je suis blanche l'hiver et brune la terre je me mets à me (la) taire et le ciel."⁴¹ The speaker's self-identification in the first line is explicit: she is "zebra-ed" by the experience of living in two very different languages, of being educated in Quebec schools *and* in her community (before and after her school years). The identifications of the subsequent line are interrupted by the word "earth," a break in cadence that derails racializing discourses of skin colour.⁴² The rest of the line unfolds with what Kanapé Fontaine calls the "Poétique de la relation au territoire," as the speaker reclaims the silences of her school years and asserts the territorial basis of her language and identity.⁴³ In translating, it is possible to recreate the breaks in syntax of such a line but it is not always possible to capture the different layers of meaning that accrue to the line. When the settler-translator in me starts to feel the

³⁹ I also wanted to retain some traces of the French language. This is less necessary in the context of *Canadian Literature* where French is present on the page but it would be important for presenting the slam orally in English.

⁴⁰ Mezei, Simon and von Flotow briefly address non-translation in their presentation of Ray Ellenwood's analysis of the 1998 film *Big Bear*. In their terms, the refusal to translate re-enacts the "power of language to exclude and silence. . . . But, at the same time, the film works to overturn this silencing, calling on English to provide a new sort of power to Cree" (7). Perhaps the French of Kanapé Fontaine's slam can provide a new sort of power to *Innu-aimun*.

⁴¹ "I am zebra-ed by language and skin colours / I am white in winter and brown the earth I set about silencing (myself) earth and sky" (Moyes 87).

⁴² Kanapé Fontaine's slam takes back skin colours in the way that an anthology title such as *Skins* edited by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm and Josie Douglas re-appropriates for contemporary Indigenous culture a term of colonial violence.

⁴³ "taire" resonates with "terre" and "se taire" (to stop speaking) evokes "se terre[r]" (to go to ground). In *Kuei*, Kanapé Fontaine writes about her realization that what she had experienced at school, what had made her so quiet, was a form of racism (77).

weight of these losses of translation, the settler-literary critic takes over. If I have twice written about this slam and the process of its translation, it has to do with a desire to address the losses, bring them to fore, and begin to honour the productive unruliness of this poetry.

I argued at the outset that words from *Innu-aimun* open alternative spaces of knowledge in Kanapé Fontaine's poetry. As I have shown in this final section, another way of opening such spaces is to destabilize the *logic* of figurative language, grammar and address on which prevailing regimes of knowledge rely. Things happen in the lines of Kanapé Fontaine's slam that are not of the order of the instituted or the received. These forms of resistance are a function of her writerly interventions in the French language but they are also a function of her choice of an oral form that changes with the moment and the medium. Kanapé Fontaine's slam, with its various titles and various instances, shows a poet working with the resources of both the French language and the oral tradition. Although the conventions of print publication required me to choose a French-language version as a point of departure and to make choices in the process of translation, I do not take the publication of "Mes lames de tannage" in *Canadian Literature* to be the correct or definitive version. What is important for me at this juncture is not to defend such choices but to conceive of the English translation as a further mobilization of Kanapé Fontaine's slam, another in a living series, and to hope the slam will have other translations—especially into Indigenous languages.

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