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"And Whom We Have Become": Indigenous Women's Narratives of Redress in Quebec

Sarah Henzi

In October 2015, Radio-Canada, the French counterpart of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), broadcast a report on police brutality, intimidation, and sexual assault committed by officers of the Sûreté du Québec (SQ), the province's police force, against Indigenous women living in Val-d'Or, a city located about five hundred kilometres northwest of Montreal. The investigative report, "Abus de la SQ: les femmes brisent le silence," was launched following the disappearance of Sindy Ruperthouse, an Algonquin woman from the Pikogan community who had been reported missing in the spring of 2014; her parents, like many other people elsewhere in Canada, criticized the police for its lack of diligence and support in searching for their daughter ("Abus"). The overall public response to the broadcast was disbelief and shock, reflecting the presumed notion that things like this do not happen in Quebec. Yet, since it was established in 1974, spokespersons for the Quebec Native Women Inc. have underlined the continued and unaddressed violence against Indigenous women in the province and across the country ("Statement"), as have numerous Indigenous writers and artists. Innu poet and Idle No More spokesperson Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, for instance, notes that "Indigenous women's resistance has never stopped. For over sixty years, families have been fighting to uncover the truth about their stolen sisters . . . and often, they must lead these inquiries on their own to shed light on [these] disappearance[s]."[1] Similarly, in her documentary *Ce silence qui tue / Quiet Killing* (2018), Abenaki filmmaker and writer Kim O'Bomsawin asks, "How can this situation continue in a country like Canada, which aspires to be a model in terms of human rights?"[2] In an interview with Radio-Canada journalist Sophie-Claude Miller, O'Bomsawin tentatively offers an answer: "There are so many people, even people who are close to me, super educated people, it's just that they did other kinds of stud-

ies or they did not have the opportunity to come into contact with that world. They say they are super ignorant themselves and it doesn't come from a lack of good will, it's just that they've never been given the chance to learn about it."[3] Echoing this lack of education and understanding, the work of Anishinaabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore has been described as illustrating "how public history and notions of self and society are shaped by mass communications" ("Rebecca Belmore"). How, indeed, have representations of Indigenous women and their lives (or rather their disappearances or their deaths) been circulated and embedded in the master narratives of the province and the country? How, ask Hamidi and Kanapé Fontaine, have "the stereotypes, prejudices, beliefs and myths that have resulted from this macabre project [of colonialism] become the very norms and rules, laws, procedures, mechanisms and triggers with which we manage our States, our institutions, our everyday and private lives?"[4] In this essay, not only do I wish to speak to these questions — that is, how women writers and artists have for years addressed the very issues that Canada's National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) struggled with — but also, I want to highlight how these literary and artistic works stand in as carriers of those who have disappeared, so that they do not disappear entirely, and importantly, how these works seek to remind us of their continuance and presence, in memory, in story, and of their humanity, their relations, their joys, and their hardships. In other words, this paper is concerned with how, as "aesthetic action[s]" (Robinson and Martin), these artistic interventions actively seek to redress[5] the troubling rhetorics of closure and settler innocence and, in so doing, not only are generative of change but also call for respectful and critical engagement, witnessing, and accountability.

"I am a tad suspicious of reconciliation," writes Stó:lō author Lee Maracle (12). "Conciliation," furthermore, "is about a fairly reciprocal relationship, in which both parties agree to the sharing of space. Re-conciliation, means the restoration of the sharing, or fair relations. . . . [But] the Sto:lo have not experienced a conciliatory relationship with either the British or Canada" (12). If, at the onset, a conciliatory relationship was never in place or intended, then of course it is difficult even to think of reconciliation.[6] To conciliate — that is, to "stop (someone) being angry or discontented" or to "placate" — comes along with an inherent understanding of

instrumentation, as in the example "concessions were made to conciliate the peasantry" ("conciliate"). In other words, and indeed from a legal perspective, one can thus understand conciliation as an interest-based process, even though the question remains: whose interest? In August 2014, when the violent death of fifteen-year-old Tina Fontaine (Sagkeeng First Nation) in Winnipeg renewed calls for a national public inquiry into the numerous cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, and when prompted about what his government was going to do about these cases, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper responded, "It isn't really high on our radar, to be honest" (Kappo). It is no secret that the Harper Conservative government was, to say the least, disrespectful and uncaring of the rights and lives of Indigenous peoples in the country; nationwide reactive movements such as Idle No More certainly made this clear. His reply was not conciliatory.

That said, riding this wave of national discontent was one of many opportunities for Justin Trudeau, Canada's current prime minister, to take action, and he vowed to launch a national inquiry into MMIWG as one of his campaign promises — which he did in August 2016. Much like with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission before, the process of the inquiry was plagued with setbacks, delays, appointed commissioners stepping down, and a thorough re-evaluation of the validity of and the ethics involved in such processes of collecting and documenting the lived experiences of survivors and families. Nonetheless, the final report was launched on 3 June 2019, revealing in no uncertain terms that "persistent and deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses are the root cause behind Canada's staggering rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people [and that] transformative legal and social changes [are necessary] to resolve the crisis that has devastated Indigenous communities across the country" ("Reclaiming"). The final, complete report, which received widespread national attention and media coverage, notes that

> the violence the National Inquiry heard about amounts to a race-based genocide of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis, which especially targets women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. This genocide has been empowered by colonial structures evidenced notably by the *Indian Act*, the Sixties Scoop, residential schools and breaches of human and Indigenous

> rights, leading directly to the current increased rates of violence, death, and suicide in Indigenous populations. (*Reclaiming* 1a: 50)

Beyond the legal framework, a supplementary report on genocide — which caused quite a kerfuffle over terminology within the political sphere — asks that genocide be considered in broader terms, and states that any analysis must include Indigenous and gender perspectives, while also emphasizing that the very unique nature of "the colonial destruction of Indigenous peoples" — that is, *colonial genocide* — "has taken place insidiously and over centuries" (*Legal* 9).[7]

In his first address following the release of the report, according to a news story by Maham Abedi, Trudeau "stopped short of calling the disappearances and deaths of Indigenous women and girls in Canada a genocide on Monday [3 June 2019], despite being called upon to do so." Later the same day, however, "he acknowledged the report's findings, telling a Vancouver crowd: 'Earlier this morning, the national inquiry formally presented their final report, in which they found that the tragic violence that Indigenous women and girls have experienced amounts to genocide.'" Trudeau's second address can certainly be seen as an act of conciliation, but because Justice Minister David Lametti explained that the federal government would, as Abedi reports, "leave the discussion of the term 'genocide' to academics and experts," the gesture seems rather empty. Of Trudeau's *volte-face*, however, one thing is clear: it is the admitting of genocide, of having — as a nation — permitted and participated in acts of genocide, that is the ultimate root of the problem. But it should not be taken today as simply accusatory; rather, let us consider it as an inheritance of which we bear a responsibility to ensure that no such events ever happen again. As noted by lawyer Naomi Sayers (Garden River First Nation), "There is no debate over what the definition of genocide is. . . . The definition is clear and the record is clear . . . . *We need to accept it and figure out how we're going to move forward*" (Abedi; emphasis added).

Another, crucial supplementary report — on Quebec — was released alongside the final report. Indeed, the commissioners found that "particular attention [was needed] to the issue of violence against Indigenous women and girls in that province. The report outlines specific issues such as language barriers, health and social services provide[d] by religious congregations and interaction with Indigenous and provincial police forces" ("Reclaiming"). A fact that is less known, given the extensive

attention that was directed at the national inquiry, is that a provincial inquiry had been underway since December 2016. The *Commission d'enquête sur les relations entre les Autochtones et certains services publics au Québec*, also known as the Viens Commission (named after Chief Commissioner Jacques Viens), was created largely in response to the 2015 news report that I referred to earlier, but more specifically it was a response to what did *not* happen after that broadcast: although eight police officers were named by their victims and were under investigation for having committed serious offences (including sexual assault) against Indigenous women in Val-d'Or, it was announced in October 2016 that no charges against them would be laid. The final report of the Viens Commission, released on 30 September 2019, found that there was indeed systemic discrimination against Indigenous Peoples in the province's public services, including police services, justice services, correctional services, health and social services, and youth protection services, and moreover that not enough had been done not only to address these issues but also to prevent harm from happening (*Public*).

I believe that the fact that the two supplementary reports to the final report of the National Inquiry on MMIWG were deemed necessary is telling of the current situation in Canada, particularly in Quebec. With regards to the first supplementary report, Chief Commissioner Marion Buller stated, "Within the National Inquiry, and in the short time we have had to do our work, families and survivors have provided important truths. These truths force us to reconsider where the roots of violence lie, and in doing so, to reconsider the solutions. . . . *The truth is* that we live in a country whose laws and institutions perpetuate violations of basic human and Indigenous rights. These violations amount to nothing less than the deliberate, often covert campaign of genocide against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people" (5; emphasis added). This can certainly be said of the second supplementary report on Quebec and of the report submitted by the Viens Commission. Ultimately, what all these reports have sought to shed light on, to record, and to testify to is the importance of truth. But, all too often, truth is understated or ignored — unless it is witnessed, recorded, and (as we are continuously seeing now) broadcast live.

On 28 September 2020, Joyce Echaquan, a thirty-seven-year-old Atikamekw woman from Manawan, passed away at the Centre hospitalier régional de Lanaudière in Saint-Charles-Borromée, Quebec — an

untimely, shocking death that has sparked outcries and renewed calls to confront systemic racism. Shortly before dying, Echaquan recorded a Facebook Live video that showed her in distress and asking for help while health care workers abused her, saying that "she was stupid, only good for sex, and that she would be better off dead" (Godin). Although the nurse and the orderly who made these racist statements have since been fired and three investigations have been launched, the core of the problem remains: for the most part, systemic racism is not being addressed, recognized, or even acknowledged in Quebec. While Trudeau decried what happened to Echaquan as the "worst form of racism" ("Joyce Echaquan"), Quebec's own premier, François Legault, stood fast in his response that while racism occurs "in the police force, in the justice system, but also outside of governmental institutions, . . . that does not mean that Quebec is racist."[8] In response to Legault's statement, thirty-seven Indigenous women led by Ojibwa producer Michèle Rouleau signed an open letter addressed to the premier, in which they state the following:

> On October 6, when you apologized on behalf of the province to the Echaquan family, you declared that "the province has failed in its duty." You also added that "for decades Aboriginal peoples have been discriminated by different levels of government" and that the province "has a duty to offer the same dignity, the same respect to everyone." Your words describe systemic racism, so why not recognize it? To fail to recognize the pervasive discrimination in all your institutions is to give it the right to exist and worse, it is to perpetuate it. Acknowledging the existence of systemic racism is not a step backwards, far from it. It is an act of courage and lucidity and it is to the credit of the people of Quebec. (Kanapé Fontaine, "Open")

To accompany the letter, Atikamekw Nehirowisiw artists Meky Ottawa and Eruoma Awashish crafted an image featuring Echaquan in the centre, surrounded by the thirty-seven women who signed the letter, signalling the importance not only of solidarity but also of relational ties between these many artists, activists, and writers (see fig. 1). Moreover, suggests Rouleau, these ties should extend to the Québécois population: "Our letter is also a call to Quebecers. Let us stop the war on words, for us, it is clear that this is systemic racism, let us change things together."[9] And indeed, on 13 October, thirty-seven non-Indigenous women also sent a letter to Legault, echoing their Indigenous counterparts: "The question of systemic racism is not a battle of words. . . . In order to find

Figure 1: "Solidarité pour Joyce." Meky Ottawa and Eruoma Awashish, artists; © Meky Ottawa and Eruoma Awashish, 2020.

solutions, we must be able to name the problem."[10] Despite these calls, Legault has yet to name or recognize the issue at heart; in the meantime, his unwillingness to acknowledge that systemic racism is a fact in the province is, if anything, a sign of further mistrust and is most certainly not conciliatory. As Grand Chief of the Atikamekw Nation Constant Awashish is reported to have conveyed, while the apology is "a step in the right direction . . . it's not nearly enough to restore trust in the community" (Leclair).

In need of a solution to her feelings of "sorrow, anger, rage, misunderstanding and disempowerment," Eruoma Awashish painted another portrait, entitled "Justice pour Joyce" (Justice for Joyce). Meant also to act as a "balm for our suffering" — and for the family in particular,

as funds raised from the sale of a limited number of prints will go to Echaquan's children — Awashish also wrote that "so that such tragedies no longer happen, let us remember our sister Joyce."[11] Ultimately, it is this important act of remembrance, of honouring life, of holding up, and of calling forth future generations that has fuelled many stories, told for decades now, by communities, activists, writers, and artists. Crucially, these stories also serve as a record to show without a doubt that there *is* systemic racism in Quebec and that it is deeply embedded in the province's institutions, as well as in the very structures of our national collective its prejudices, habits, values, and practices. In 1976, for instance, Innu writer An Antane Kapesh, the first Indigenous woman to publish a book in French in Canada, outlined in her memoir *Eukuan nin matshimanitu innushkueu / Je suis une maudite sauvagesse* (recently translated into English under the title *I Am a Damn Savage*) the very same kinds of violence that are listed in the Viens report and in the final report of the National Inquiry; she, too, spoke of the hidden violence in health care facilities and of the complicity of authorities in perpetuating them. Notably, in a chapter on her experiences with members of the police force, she writes,

> After [my son] was admitted to hospital, I thought to go see the chief of police to tell him that two of the city's officers had injured my son. . . . I told him: "Did you hear about what happened last night? Apparently two officers injured my son." The chief of police told me: "I heard about it." Then he added: "If your son was injured by police officers, it cannot have been by my men, it must have been by RCMP officers." The chief of police then told me: "When the officers injured your boy, you are lucky I was not there, he would be dead!" Then he showed me a gun and said: "It is with this gun that I would have shot your boy and I would have shot him in the head." (111, 113)

While Kapesh did not shy away from narrating colonial violence the way it really was, and this despite such open threats, she was nonetheless silenced in another way: her book was out of print for nearly four decades.

In her preface to the newly released re-edition of Kapesh's text, Innu author Naomi Fontaine writes: "I read Kapesh when I was twenty-seven years old. . . . One question remains: how? For me, an author, an avid reader, a teacher, a passionate person about her culture. How is it possible

that no one, not a professor, not a literary person, not a member of my family or of my community, told me that this book was the one I had to read?"[12] Because of a "refusal to hear," she replies. A refusal to hear about the truth — the truth about the fact that "no sacrifice is too great when one is building a country. . . . Not the Indians. Not their rights. Not human dignity."[13] "I thirst for truth," writes Fontaine. "I need to understand before I can trust again."[14] Much like her literary Elder, Fontaine, in her own writing, seeks to provide a truthful portrait of her community, Uashat — the same community to which Kapesh and her family were relocated in the early 1950s. That said, she is the first to admit, in the pages of her novel *Kuessipan*, that "of course I lied, that I put a white veil on what is dirty."[15] What is dirty or sullied is not the community itself or its people, however, but the statistics that draw attention to single-parent families, children in foster care, domestic violence, and substance abuse. "It is hard to hear that one is a statistic," shared Fontaine during an interview in one of my courses. In her writing, she explained, she aspires to write men and women "[who are] no longer a statistic; they are a person, a human, with their joys and hardships" (Interview). And so begins her debut novel, *Kuessipan*:

> I invented lives. . . . And these other lives, I embellished them. I wanted to see beauty, I wanted to create it. To denaturalize things — I do not want to name those things — so as to see only the fire that still burns in the hearts of the first inhabitants. . . . A reconstructed reserve where children play outdoors, where mothers make babies to love them, and where the language survives. I would have liked for things to be easier to say, to tell, to put to paper, without hoping for anything, just to be understood. But who wants to read such words as drugs, incest, alcohol, solitude, suicide, bounced cheques, rape?[16]

In acknowledging the invented lives of her unnamed protagonists — the old man with the drum (9), the girl with the round belly (11), the young woman in the purple dress (43), the sunburned fat woman (58), the man who wishes he was more (60), the young man on the train (97) — Fontaine also reveals the limitations of such an endeavour, realizing that writing silence is not possible (16). Nor is it desirable, in the end, for *Kuessipan* is written to and for her son, who is named in the book and holds the final chapter, "Nikuss." Fontaine's role and responsibility as a writer and as a mother — again, much like Kapesh — is to

write for the next generation. It means being accountable to her children and her grandchildren, and explaining to them that sometimes "the earth gets bent out of shape according to the whims of humans."[17] In this way, Fontaine's writing follows Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck's call for more desire-centred frameworks — ones that rely on the importance of felt experiences as community knowledges — in that while the lives of her invented characters do attest to loss and despair, they also, and importantly, showcase the hope, visions, and wisdom of lived lives and communities (417). "Desire," writes Tuck, "is the song about walking through the storm, a song that recognizes rather than denies that pain doubtlessly lies ahead" (419).[18] A particularly striking passage in *Kuessipan* illustrates this form of celebratory resilience beautifully:

> The beating of the drum makes the women get up first. They follow one another, dancing one foot forward, the other slightly bent. Like a person with a limp. Letting the song deepen each movement, each slow step, hands close to the body. Smiling. The circle is formed intuitively. A bold woman cries out. The cry of an Indian woman, loud, piercing. There is laughter, echoes to her voice. Movements gain momentum, some roll their shoulders, the pulsing of hands running down to the hips. Youth let themselves be led, imitating their parents. The circle is boundless, the chairs empty. Then the drum slows down. Steps fade away. The old man is applauded, as is the song of the past. Eyes meet, proud eyes. The desire to be oneself.[19]

As the women dance, the youth follow. In this passage, I recognize the words of Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard who, in an interview about Dechinta Bush University, speak of the importance of Elders and knowledge holders, and how, as emphasized by Coulthard, by "re-embed[ding] students in the social relations that are embodied by land and place" and by "reintroduc[ing] and re-plac[ing] Indigenous peoples on their lands, with the knowledge holders that are experts in those practices," the violence of colonization — the storm — can begin to be undone. Young people can learn, once again, from their Elders and from the land, but also by being a part of the kinship ties and collective memory of the community. They become extensions of all the elements held in the moment of the dance: dance steps are taught, language exists in song, and the beat of the drum, to borrow from Innu poet Joséphine

Bacon, brings together the "hearts gathered" (21) and resonates across the *nutshimit* (1).

In her breathtaking essay "#ItEndsHere: Rebelling against Colonial Gender Violence," Anishnaabe poet Leanne Betasamosake Simpson reminds her readers that "rather than seeking recognition from Canada for this pain and suffering, I feel compelled to use this anger to build nations and communities where violence within our interpersonal relationships is unimaginable. . . . I am not murdered. I am not missing. And so I am going to honour her, by continuing her work, and fighting for Indigenous nations and a relationship with Canada that is no longer based on violence, heteropatriarchy and silence." Relying on the results of national inquiries is not enough; neither is hoping for state-sanctioned solutions or compromises. Mobilization and resurgence are key for Simpson, who notes in her essay "#ItEndsHere" that "resurgence is about bodies and land." In an interview with Simpson about her involvement with Dechinta Bush University, she adds, "Dechinta actively addresses the violence of dispossession by validating student experience, by placing bodies back on the land and by setting up the conditions for the Dechinta community to re-centre learning around these connections" (L. Simpson and Coulthard). In 2018, Innu artist and curator Sonia Robertson conceived of the exhibit *AKI Odehi: cicatrices de la Terre-Mère* (*AKI Odehi: Scars of Mother Earth*), which brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists who, inspired by the land around them, sought to explore the wounds and losses that were tied to specific places of gathering and memory, considered as *AKI Odehi*, "lieux de cœur," or places of the heart. Held at the exhibition centre in Val-d'Or, the exhibit — to echo the words of Simpson and Coulthard above — was meant to participate in the process of undoing the harm of colonization, including, as Robertson explains, "among other things violence against First Nations women, missing Indigenous women, the flooding and violation of the land, the change in the relationship between the First Nations and Quebecers, . . . as well as child abductions related to the Indian Act and residential schools."[20] As a process, the exhibit unfolded in two steps: first, Robertson "invited artists to create, in situ, ephemeral works, inspired by Land Art and relational art practices, so as to create artistic experiences that were both aesthetically and ethically strong, which, in turn, might enable spaces for dialogue, conciliation, and rec-

onciliation between the different communities in the region."[21] Then, Robertson gathered together the "traces" of these performances and of those of the processes of consultation and collaboration that informed the different productions.

Cree-Algonquin novelist and poet Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau was one of the invited artists. "When I was asked to participate," Pésémapéo Bordeleau explained, "I immediately thought that I wanted to do a piece on Sindy Ruperthouse, who is Algonquin from Val d'Or [and] who disappeared in 2014."[22] Because Robertson's concept required consultations with Elders and families, I wanted to know more about how Pésémapéo Bordeleau integrated this into her desire not only to write about Ruperthouse but also to do so in a way that was respectful of what Ruperthouse's family members might want (and not want). After all, it is no small feat to write about the lives of others, as my discussion above on *Kuessipan* reveals, but to write about mothers, daughters, and sisters who have gone missing, whose lives have been left in suspension, is something else. To do so without causing surprise, offense, or harm — even unwillingly and inadvertently — asks for, to borrow from Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, "respect, attentiveness, intellectual rigor, and no small amount of moral courage" (9).[23] In an email, Pésémapéo Bordeleau explained to me that she had "visited [Sindy's] parents in Pikogan, so that they could tell me about her. They agreed to the publication of the poetry collection because, according to them, it was important to keep talking about her so that she was not forgotten."[24] In addition to the collection, *Poésie en marche pour Sindy*, which was released in 2018 — thus, after the exhibit — Pésémapéo Bordeleau created gardens spelling the letters S-I-N-D-Y that were placed in strategic, emblematic places in Val-d'Or during two walks: "[Sindy's parents, one of her sisters, and her aunt] walked with us on both occasions and attended our vernissage at the exhibit centre. The first walk was at the beginning of June, when we planted the seeds. The second one was on July 14, and the flowers had grown" (see figs. 2 and 3).[25] Another garden was placed on the facade of the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre that sponsored *AKI Odehi* (see fig. 4).

The term "poésie en marche" in the title of Pésémapéo Bordeleau's book in reference to these two walks is difficult to render properly in the English language; it best translates as "poetry in motion," but that English phrase lacks the organicity and embodied aspect of

Figure 2: “Ensemencement.” Carmelle Adam, photographer; © Centre d’exposition de Val-d’Or, 2018.

Figure 3: “Sindy.” Raphaël Paquin, photographer; © Centre d’exposition de Val-d’Or, 2018.

the experience of walking, something that was central to Pésémapéo Bordeleau's intervention, as noted above. In addition to the act of walking, preparing and working the earth and gardens influenced Pésémapéo Bordeleau's writing process further: "The first verses had already been written when the Val-d'Or centre contacted me to be a part of Aki Odehi," she explained to me. "The ideas came quickly, and working on the installation (cleaning the ground, cutting out the big letters, meeting people with Carmelle Adam [the centre's director] for the gardens, etc.) helped me find the words to continue the text. When we walked the first time, in June, there were only twelve verses. Later, after the second walk, I had a lot of images to continue and finish the collection."[26] The gardens acted as reminders of Sindy's presence, rather than of her absence: "We shall write your name / in the spaces where your spirit wanders / waiting / for the discovery of your body."[27] Inscribed upon the land and upon the city space itself, they acted as reminders that her place — her home — was still there, waiting to be claimed, however long it might take:

> Sindy you still keep your distance
> But we long for your presence
> The ceremonies are waiting for you
> The Way of the ancestors hopes for you
> The drums resonate
> Within reach of your spirit[28]

Moreover, having community and family members participate in the walk and in the land-based installations (in sowing the seeds, for instance) reflects that recentring that Simpson and Coulthard both call for; the act of walking — that is, walking bodies, people back on the land — becomes an extension of the embodied experience of belonging to that landscape and the memories that it holds:

> The flowers and the moss will say
> that you still live
> in the heart of your mother of your father
> Of all those who loved you[29]

In terms of colonial violence, specifically against Indigenous women, land-based projects and installations like Pésémapéo Bordeleau's remind us that colonial influences are architecturally — and thematically — always present everywhere. As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson has noted, "Canada is quite simply, a settler society whose multicultural,

liberal and democratic structure and performance of governance seeks an ongoing 'settling' of this land" and, in order to secure its sovereignty, Canada requires the death and the so-called disappearance of Indigenous bodies, particularly women. The ties between land, bodies, and women have been established by many Indigenous scholars over the years, notably by Muscogee Creek lawyer Sarah Deer, who, in *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*, explains that "it is impossible to have a truly self-determining nation when its members have been denied self-determination over their own bodies. One of my mentors, Ho-Chunk anti-rape activist Bonnie Clairmont,

Figure 4: "Sindy." Raphaël Paquin, photographer; © Centre d'exposition de Val-d'Or, 2018.

writes, 'Women's sovereignty is central to Indian sovereignty because nations cannot be free if their Indian women are not free'" (xvi). Thus, placing Indigenous bodies back on the land is not only crucial but also a corrective to the narratives of disappearance and erasure, narratives that are deemed essential if the status quo of "settling" is to be maintained by governing and state-sanctioned authorities of the settler state. The only flaw here is an assumption that, as Audra Simpson reminds her readers, these disappearances and acts of erasure can work only if there is no one left behind to claim and to remember those who have left too soon. But

they *do* belong — to a people, to a family, and to a specific place and territory — and they *will* be claimed. "Red women," writes Pésémapéo Bordeleau, "*we are* the voice that rises from deep in our loins / from our stomachs there where we carry humanity / *we are* the voices that call out your name / *Sindy*" (emphasis added).[30]

Renowned for her urban installations and performances, Anishnabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore participated in a billboard intervention, *PLAN LARGE*, carried out in Montreal in 2007. Her piece, entitled "Fringe," shows a woman lying on her side, her back revealing a long, painful-looking gash that has been sewn up and from which threaded red beads create the illusion of trickling blood. Placed atop the Darling Brothers Foundry, strategically located between Old Montreal, Griffintown, and Downtown Montreal, the billboard was erected not only at an important artistic landmark site — the disaffected foundry, which hosts a contemporary art gallery as well as several artists' studios, is one of Québec Éphémère's in situ projects that sought to repurpose abandoned industrial buildings that were slated for demolition into spaces dedicated to the visual arts ("InspirAction") — but also at the heart of one of Montreal's most visited neighbourhoods by tourists, and it is clearly visible to daily commuters as well (see fig. 5). In this way, and despite the ephemeral

Figure 5: Billboard, Plan Large. © Fonderie Darling, 2007.

aspect of the medium, it was indeed a body, an image, that would not disappear from the Montreal imaginary. The repurposing of the billboard image itself — often used to depict missing persons alongside highways — thus serves to force upon onlookers a shift in consciousness: as noted by Marcia Crosby, "all of the various elements in Belmore's work may raise questions for an audience, but they do not offer answers or resolution or any specific call to action — just a nervous uncertainty" (35). For motorists speeding along the highway, the image appears suddenly and unexpectedly — and there is neither time nor space to stop in order to take it in. One is left wondering: What was that image exactly? A wounded woman? A sleeping woman? And what was that mark across her back? A wound — a scar — something else? Both the image and the uncertainty of what it actually represents will not disappear.

Should motorists take it upon themselves to find out more, they might consult *Facing the Monumental*, a book published by the Art Gallery of Ontario and edited by Anishinaabe curator Wanda Nanabush, following the exhibit of the same name. An excerpt from the 1993 final-report of the Winnipeg Case Study of Health and Social Services accompanies a close-up of the scar:

> On November 24, 1980, a St. Boniface surgeon inserted two glass beads (description of the number of beads inserted varies from media reports of "dozens" to the Hall Inquiry Report of "two") into the ends of a suture after a lung biopsy on a fifty-two-year-old Cree woman from Shamattawa in northern Manitoba. The surgeon claimed he had joked with the patient about inserting these beads prior to the surgery, and indicated to a subsequent inquiry that he had meant to communicate his respect for the patient's beadwork abilities. He claimed to have used another Cree male patient in the hospital as an interpreter, although this individual denied any knowledge of a discussion about beads. The patient, who did not speak English, claimed no such consent was obtained and was embarrassed and angry after wondering why hospital staff were looking at her surgical area and laughing (the sutures were located below her right armpit in an area she could not see without the aid of a mirror). (28)

I am appalled — and somewhat terrified — by the similarities between this event and what happened to Joyce Echaquan. Thirty years apart, these two events reveal the lack of respect, consent, care, and humanity

that both women experienced. In both cases, laughter and mockery by staff members occur. How is any of this funny? How can it be perceived as such? Part of the answer lies, as noted above by Hamidi and Kanapé Fontaine, in how stereotypes and prejudices are internalized to the point where they become a behavioural norm in many institutions. That said, this does not fully account for the profound, continued dehumanization that is occurring on a daily basis across the country. This is, quite simply and clearly, systemic racism.

At the very least, though, interventions like Belmore's call upon us first to witness a specific kind of truth, albeit an unsettling kind, one that compels us to "reconnect[] reason and emotion — head and heart," as settler scholar Paulette Regan so aptly puts it (12). For indeed, in order to be both ethically and pedagogically challenging, such interventions rely on the viewer's sensuous and intellectual experience of and response to the uncertain, the abject, and indiscriminate or retributive violence, and ultimately on their acceptance of, indifference toward, or reaction to its different representations. Let us not forget, though, that they also rely on our experience of and response to beauty, longing, and the hidden possibilities within. As Nanabush notes in the preface to her volume,

> I will never forget driving through Montreal streets to La Centrale, a local arts hub, and catching sight of *Fringe* (2007) on a billboard. . . . I recognized the way the beads hung as a symbol of First Nations clothing, a sign of tradition, change, and endurance. The scar is disturbing, but the woman is not a victim. She is more than this scar. . . . The piece makes me think of the scars all Indigenous women carry as a consequence of being relegated to the fringes of society. Yet, even there, we make community and beautify our world as much as we can. (12)

In other words, what Belmore's works instill in viewers is a choice. "Although they engage with historical events," says Nanabush, "they are not history lessons but rather experiences and provocations. . . . [They] allow[] us to explore our affective responses on our own terms" (13). And, much like Naomi Fontaine, the open-endedness of *Fringe* allows for something intrinsically so violent and traumatic to become something else — something beautiful, even, in that it ultimately attests to the woman's strength as well as to her resilience. As Belmore explains in a conversation with Kathleen Ritter excerpted on her personal website,

> As an Indigenous woman, my female body speaks for itself. Some people interpret the image of this reclining figure as a cadaver. However, to me it is a wound that is on the mend. It wasn't self-inflicted, but nonetheless, it is bearable. She can sustain it. So it is a very simple scenario: she will get up and go on, but she will carry that mark with her. She will turn her back on the atrocities inflicted upon her body and find resilience in the future. The Indigenous female body is the politicized body, the historical body. It's the body that doesn't disappear.

It is thus more than a scar; it is a suture, a mend, an embroidery — and it holds her together.

Second, such interventions require us to be accountable to our responsibilities as witnesses. To the question "what do I do with these?" our duty — as educators, for instance — is to have these unsettling conversations, to bring them out and beyond the walled institutions and limited textbooks, and to engage with them, as uncomfortable as they may make us feel, as stories of redress, as other kinds of truth, and as correctives to narratives of disappearance and erasure. Such truths ask us not only to be better but also to *do* better. Mohawk filmmaker Sonia Bonspille Boileau recently pleaded online to her friends in education in a similar way:

> My teacher friends (and friends of friends), who already teach your children how to develop critical thought, how to think and articulate ideas, how to see things differently. . . . Dear teachers, who moderate debates in classrooms, who bring up social issues in order to talk about them. . . . Please talk about the harm that racism causes. Talk about Joyce. Or at least, talk about the First Nations, in the present tense, not just in the past tense. . . . Please understand me, I am not saying that it falls onto teachers to end systemic racism. But education is part of the equation. And I too want to be a part of it.[31]

For instance, teaching the works of Indigenous women, inviting them to be part of conversations held in the classroom, and furthering the promotion and the translation of their works — these are things that we as scholars and teachers can do. So is adapting our methodologies toward the transformative challenges not only of decolonizing our institutions but also of Indigenizing these spaces by supporting Indigenous epistemologies, knowledges, methodologies, and languages. Finally, as citizens, holding our leaders accountable — and calling them out when neces-

sary — is also something we can and must do. In the words of the thirty-seven Indigenous signatories as they concluded their letter, "Today we ask you [Premier François Legault] to be bold. There is still time to make the right decisions for the future of Quebec, for the future of our children, ours and yours, and for Joyce's children. . . . It is for them and for all our future generations that we unite our voices today. We are telling you that there can be a better Quebec for all of us" (Kanapé Fontaine).

And so, the work continues.

Naomi Fontaine has written about the challenges of "try[ing] to understand the existence of a person whom one has never met. [And w]ithin that unsuccessful thought, to hit a wall so hard, that understanding is no longer useful."[32] Inventing lives is no easy feat, but doing so can provide some solace to those left behind. Yet, these lives are never entirely invented. With regard to her most recent feature film, *Rustic Oracle* (2019), which explores the disappearance of a young teenager, Heather, through the eyes of her eight-year-old sister, Ivy (played by Lake Delisle), Sonia Bonspille Boileau wanted her film to be both nostalgic and realistic; as such, she had long conversations with the young actresses and their families before shooting the movie to make sure they understood the depth of the issues it would explore. Delisle's mother told Boileau that they had had that conversation and that she herself knew very well the family of Tiffany Morrison, a young woman from Kahnawá:ke who was found murdered in 2006 (Boileau, "Interview"). In other words, the young actors knew the narratives of disappearance and erasure and knew that these narratives were a part of their history, of their present lives; as Pésémapéo Bordeleau conveys so beautifully in her poetry, "We are sisters / elsewhere than by blood / We are sisters / In this feminitude / that the other half of the world / crushes and kills."[33] While such stories may "inhabit them," they also "nourish" the process and ultimately "enrich and embellish" the story (Boileau, "Interview"). For Boileau as for Fontaine, Pésémapéo Bordeleau, and Belmore, it is crucial and necessary to see, beyond loss, the love, the support, and the care that are shared within families and communities. It is equally crucial to acknowledge that ultimately these are all *real lives* that will not be forgotten, because the memories of them and their sovereignty are recognized, enacted, embodied, and shared in story. The stories, through literature and art, of those who have disappeared are carried on so that these individuals

do not disappear entirely; they are restorative and generative of change, and they call for — or perhaps demand — witnessing and accountability.

Author's Note

The title of this article, "And Whom We Have Become," is a translation of "Et qui nous sommes devenus" (Fontaine, *Kuessipan* 78). All translations in this article are mine, and the French originals are included in footnotes.

Notes

[1] "La résistance des femmes autochtones n'a jamais cessé. Depuis plus de soixante ans, des familles luttent pour mettre au jour la vérité sur leurs sœurs volées — *Stolen Sisters* — et elles doivent souvent mener les enquêtes elles-mêmes pour faire la lumière sur leur disparition" (Hamidi and Kanapé Fontaine 15).

[2] "Comment cette situation peut-elle perdurer dans un pays comme le Canada qui se veut un modèle en matière de droits humains?" (O'Bomsawin).

[3] "Il y a tellement de monde, même dans mon entourage, des gens super instruits, c'est juste qu'ils ont fait d'autres genres d'études ou ils n'ont pas eu la chance d'entrer en contact avec cet univers-là. Ils se disent eux-mêmes super méconnaissants et ça ne part pas d'une mauvaise volonté, c'est juste qu'on ne leur a jamais donné la chance d'apprendre sur le sujet" (Miller).

[4] "Les stéréotypes, les préjugés, croyances et mythes qui découlent de ce macabre projet sont transformés en normes et deviennent les règles, les lois, les procédures, les mécanismes et automatismes avec lesquels nous gérons nos États, nos institutions, notre quotidien et notre vie privée" (Hamidi and Kanapé Fontaine 14).

[5] To this end, I want to think of the term "redress" beyond its judicial meaning and to consider it while bearing in mind the intimate tie with the term *se redresser*, in French, which means to stand up. In other words, it is more than to put things right: it is to stand ground, to stand up, and to carry oneself and those who came before. It is about agency and about collective memory.

[6] At its 2019 annual gathering, the Indigenous Literary Studies Association included a conversation between Métis Elder and writer Maria Campbell and Nłeʔkepmx, Syilx, and Métis writer Nicola Campbell. According to Maria Campbell, instead of reconciliation, we need to think about "putting things right," or *kwaskastahsowin*. This connects to how I want to think of "redress" in this essay.

[7] I have written elsewhere about how the term "genocide" has gradually been removed from the Canadian Criminal Code (see Henzi).

[8] "Ça [le racisme] existe dans la police, ça existe dans la justice, mais ça existe aussi en dehors des institutions gouvernementales. . . . Ça ne veut pas dire que la nation québécoise est raciste" (Bellerose).

[9] "Notre lettre, c'est aussi un appel aux Québécois et aux Québécoises. Cessons la guerre des mots, pour nous c'est clair que c'est du racisme systémique, changeons les choses ensemble" (Paul).

[10] "La question du racisme systémique n'est pas une bataille de mots, monsieur le

Premier Ministre. Pour trouver des solutions, il faut pouvoir nommer le problème" (Simard and Lacelle).

[11] "Depuis cet événement qui nous a tous secoués, je me suis demandé ce que je pourrais faire pour apaiser ma peine, ma colère, ma rage, mon incompréhension et mon impuissance. Alors voilà, aujourd'hui, j'ai [fait ce] portrait de Joyce Echaquan pour lui rendre hommage et mettre un baume sur nos souffrances. . . . Pour que plus jamais de tels drames se produisent, gardons en mémoire notre sœur Joyce" ("Eruoma Awashish").

[12] "J'ai lu Kapesh à vingt-sept ans. . . . Une question demeure: comment? Pour moi une auteure, une lectrice assidue, une enseignante, une passionnée de sa culture. Comment est-ce possible que personne, ni un professeur, ni un littéraire, ni un membre de ma famille ou de communauté, ne m'ait révélé que ce livre était celui que je devais lire?" (Fontaine, Preface 5, 7).

[13] Un "refus d'entendre"; "Aucun sacrifice n'est trop grand lorsqu'on veut bâtir un pays. . . . Ni les Indiens. Ni leurs droits. Ni la dignité humaine" (Fontaine, Preface 7).

[14] "J'ai soif de vérité. J'ai besoin de comprendre avant de faire confiance, une seconde fois" (Fontaine, Preface 8).

[15] "Bien sûr que j'ai menti, que j'ai mis un voile blanc sur ce qui est sale" (Fontaine, *Kuessipan* 11).

[16] "J'ai inventé des vies. . . . Et ces autres vies, je les ai embellies. Je voulais voir la beauté, je voulais la faire. Dénaturer les choses — je ne veux pas nommer ces choses — pour n'en voir que le tison qui brûle encore dans le cœur des premiers habitants. . . . Une réserve reconstruite où les enfants jouent dehors, où les mères font des enfants pour les aimer, où on fait survivre la langue. J'aurais aimé que les choses soient plus faciles à dire, à conter, à mettre en page, sans rien espérer, juste être comprise. Mais qui veut lire des mots comme drogue, inceste, alcool, solitude, suicide, chèque en bois, viol?" (Fontaine, *Kuessipan* 7).

[17] "La terre se déforme selon les caprices des humains" (Fontaine, *Kuessipan* 111).

[18] Concerning this reference to Tuck's seminal article, "Suspending Damage," it is worth pointing out that the dangers of damage-centred research (and by extension of damage-centred art) in its "document[ation of] peoples' pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression" (409) might also be complicit in the further portrayal of brutality against Indigenous women, as used by artists — as well as by scholars analyzing these artists' works — to enhance their own position. I strive to do my best and aim to do better in my work; essays such as this one — or with regard to a lengthier project, my translation of An Antane Kapesh's work — are shaped by the crucial need to obtain consent from individuals and to involve family members, friends, and community members as needed. My hope is that my work does not become damaging or perpetuating of damage, but rather that it participates in "putting things right."

[19] "Le battement du tambour fait lever les femmes en premier. Se suivent les unes les autres, dansent un pied en avant, l'autre légèrement replié. À la manière d'un boiteux. Laissent le chant approfondir chaque mouvement, chaque pas qui se veut lent, les mains près du corps. Souriant. Le cercle se forme intuitivement. Une femme téméraire pousse un cri. Un cri d'Indienne, fort, aigu. Il y a des rires, des échos à sa voix. Les mouvements s'amplifient, certains jouent des épaules, accélèrent la pulsation des mains jusqu'aux hanches. Les jeunes se laissent conduire, imitant leurs parents. Le cercle est immense, les chaises vides. Puis le tambour ralentit. Les pas s'estompent. On applaudit le vieux et le chant du passé. Les regards se croisent, les yeux fiers. Le désir d'être soi" (Fontaine, *Kuessipan* 44).

[20] "On a entre autres la violence faite aux femmes des Premières nations, les femmes autochtones disparues, l'inondation et la violation du territoire, le changement dans la relation entre les Premières nations et les Québécois, . . . et l'enlèvement des enfants lié à la Loi sur les Indiens et les pensionnats" (Limage).

[21] "Sonia Robertson . . . a donc invité les artistes à réaliser des œuvres *in situ*, éphémères,

inspirées des pratiques en Land Art et en art relationnel, afin de créer des expériences artistiques, esthétiquement et éthiquement fortes, offrant des espaces de dialogue, de conciliation et de réconciliation entre les différentes communautés de la région" (Graff 108).

[22] "Quand on m'a demandé de participer à ce projet-là, j'ai immédiatement pensé que je voulais faire un travail sur Sindy Ruperthouse, qui est une Anichinabée de Val-d'Or qui a disparu en 2014" (Limage).

[23] In March 2018, a controversy erupted following the publication of Mi'kmaq poet Shannon Webb-Campbell's *Who Took My Sister?*, a collection of poems about missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. "Some of the poems described their deaths in graphic detail," explained Cree poet and radio host Rosanna Deerchild, who invited Webb-Campbell to speak on *CBC Unreserved* about what had happened — "but that's not why the book was pulled." Instead, the issue was that "Webb-Campbell had not asked families for permission to write about their loved ones, a step referred to by Indigenous writers, as permission protocol." After consultations with established writers such as Cree publisher Greg Younging and Stó:lō author Lee Maracle, Webb-Campbell set out to make things right, and "to do the ethical work around the book." She added, "I wrote to each of the families in the book, explained what I had done, offered my apology and removed all those poems from the book" (qtd. in Deerchild). Edited in close collaboration with Maracle, a new book, *I Am a Body of Land*, was published in January 2019. The new collection focuses on how "individual and collective trauma are related and bears little resemblance to *Who Took My Sister?* While Webb-Campbell said the new work is her way of moving on from the controversy, she is still working on forgiving herself" (Deerchild).

[24] "J'ai rendu visite aux parents à Pikogan, afin qu'ils me parlent d'elle. Ils étaient d'accord pour la publication du recueil parce que, selon eux, il fallait continuer à parler d'elle pour qu'elle ne soit pas oubliée" (Pésémapéo Bordeleau, Email).

[25] "[Les parents, une de ses sœurs, et sa tante] ont marché avec nous aux deux occasions et ont assisté à notre vernissage au centre d'exposition. La première marche a été faite en début juin, où nous avons semé les graines. La seconde marche a été effectuée le 14 juillet, les fleurs avaient poussé" (Pésémapéo Bordeleau, Email).

[26] "Les premiers strophes étaient écrits quand le Centre de Val d'Or m'a contactée pour faire partie du projet Aki Odehi. Les idées sont arrivées rapidement, et de travailler sur l'installation (nettoyer le sol, découper les lettres en grand, rencontrer les gens avec Carmelle Adam [la directrice du Centre] pour les lieux des jardins etc.) m'a aidée à trouver les mots pour continuer le texte. Quand nous avons marché la première fois, c'était en juin, il y avait seulement 12 strophes. Plus tard, après la seconde marche j'avais plein d'images pour continuer à écrire et terminer le recueil" (Pésémapéo Bordeleau, Email).

[27] "Nous écrirons ton nom / Dans les lieux où ton esprit vagabonde / En attente / De la découverte de ton corps" (Pésémapéo Bordeleau, *Poésie* 23).

[28] "Sindy tu gardes encore tes distances / Mais nous aspirons à ta présence / Les cérémonies t'attendent / La Voie des ancêtres t'espère / Les tambours résonnent / À la portée de ton esprit" (Pésémapéo Bordeleau, *Poésie* 19).

[29] "Les fleurs et la mousse diront / Que tu vis toujours / Dans le cœur de ta mère de ton père / De tous ceux et celles qui t'ont aimée" (Pésémapéo Bordeleau, *Poésie* 22).

[30] "Femmes rouges / Nous sommes la parole qui monte au creux des reins / Du ventre là où nous portons l'humanité / Nous sommes les voix pour crier ton nom / *Sindy*" (Pésémapéo Bordeleau, *Poésie* 16).

[31] "Mes amis (et amis des amis) enseignant(e)s, vous qui apprenez déjà à nos enfants comment développer la pensée critique, comment réfléchir et articuler des idées, comment voir les choses autrement. . . . Vous, chers enseignant(e)s qui animez des débats en classe, qui présentez des enjeux de société afin d'en parler. . . . / Svp parlez du mal que fait le racisme. Parlez de Joyce. / Ou au moins, parlez des Premières nations, au présent, pas juste

au passé. . . . / Comprenez[-]moi bien, je ne dis aucunement que ça repose sur les enseignants de mettre fin au racisme systémique. Mais l'éducation fait partie de l'équation. Et moi aussi je veux en faire partie" (Boileau, Untitled).

[32] "Tenter de comprendre l'existence d'une personne que l'on n'a jamais vue. Dans la pensée infructueuse, happer un mur si violemment que comprendre ne sert plus à rien" (Fontaine, *Kuessipan,* 101-02).

[33] "Nous sommes sœurs / Ailleurs que par les liens du sang / Nous sommes sœurs / Dans cette féminitude / Que l'autre moitié du monde / Écrase et tue" (Pésémapéo Bordeleau, *Poésie* 29).

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