

# Listening to “Mes lames de tannage”

## Notes toward a Translation

**Mes lames de tannage (slam)**  
***My tanning knives (slam)***

Natasha Kanapé Fontaine  
*Translation Lianne Moyes*<sup>1</sup>

Qui es-tu? . . .

*Who are you? . . .*

Pourquoi me demandes-tu d'où je viens

*Why do you ask me where I come from*

quand c'est toi-même qui m'a désarmée de mes armes de chasse?

*when it is you who stripped me of my hunting arms?*

Territoire. . . Territerre terrimaterre terrirame terrame terripagaie-moi<sup>2</sup>

La vie l'existence entre les lignes de ma sale ignorance sur mes propres terres.

*Life existence within the lines of my shameful ignorance on my own land*

Terrislamme-moi la preuve que tu en connais plus que moi-même,

*LandSlam-me proof that you know more than I do*

Enterre-toi les épreuves de mon holocauste et de mes derniers vestiges territoriaux.

*Bury yourself the struggles of my holocaust and the last remains of my land.*

Oui ! Fais-toi des bibliothèques des archives sur le prologue – préface-toi l'oralité de ma mémoire

*Sure! Build yourself libraries archives on the prologue – preface yourself the orality of my memory*

la territorialité de ma langue pendue aux dernières cimes identitaires

*the territoriality of my tongue hanging on the last few peaks of identity*

Alors ne t'étonne pas si je te rappelle que JE-ME-SOUVIENS

*So don't be surprised if I remind you that je-me-souviens*<sup>3</sup>

Je me souviendrai à l'évidence

*I will remember incontestably*

Toi-même tu te caches un regard fuyant les loups de ma colère. . .

*You, you hide yourself behind a look evading the wolves of my anger*

Nunavikopolis par David Goudreault

*Nunavikopolis by David Goudreault*

il y a enfin quelqu'un qui a compris le nom des cours d'eaux

*finally someone who understands the names of waterways*

du littoral des douleurs du coeur de mes préoccupations

*from the shorelines of pain of the heart of my preoccupations*

L'ignorance est funèbre où est la différence je suis zèbre de langue et couleurs de peaux

*Ignorance is deadly where is the difference I am zebra-ed by language and skin colours*

Je suis blanche l'hiver et brune la terre je me mets à me (la) taire et le ciel

*I am white in winter and brown the earth I set about silencing (myself) earth and sky*

Sont scindés en deux brise-rives frêles couchées sur l'éternel éther délibéré.

*Are split in two broken shorelines lying frail on the undying spirit of counsel*

Je les aurais faites miennes ces cavernes aux mains soufflées de jouvence

*I would have made them mine these caves with hands blown full of youth*

Mais voici on vit mieux sur tes villes que sur tes réserves mon peuple

*But there it is we live better in your cities than on your reserves my people*

Surpeuplé dans ses propres demeures délabrés villages renfermés

*Overcrowded in their own homes dilapidated villages closed in*

Quoi ? Tu te prends pour le castor avec tes barrages tu te prends pour l'orage

*What's that? You think you're a beaver with your dams you think you're a storm*

Pour détourner les rivières cesse donc de te croire maître des étendues sauvages

*Diverting rivers stop believing you're the master of the wilderness will you*

Et reconnais donc notre existence!

*And acknowledge our existence!*

Car plus rien n'existera. . . Plus rien n'existera pour ta propre descendance!

*Because there will be nothing left . . . Nothing left for your own descendants!*

Combien de fois dois-je te le dire combien de fois dois-je le HURLER

*How many times do I have to tell you how many times do I have to HOWL*

Combien de fois te l'écrire JE SURVIVRAI

*How many times do I have to write you I WILL SURVIVE*

Je survivrai parce que je dois me battre pour enfin entendre le battement

*I will survive because I have to fight to finally feel the beat*

De nos coeurs emplis d'espoir le battement de nos tambours venus d'un autre temps  
*Of our hearts filled with hope the beat of our drums come from another time*

Je vibre aux murmures imperceptibles, ceux que je n'entends plus que j'oublie dans  
le creux

*I vibrate with imperceptible rumblings those I no longer hear those I forget  
in the hollows*

de ces tambours et ces chants qui s'éloignent sur le fleuve. . . inaudible hurlement. . .  
*of these drums and these songs retreating into the distance on the river. . .  
inaudible screams. . .*

Ne regardons plus en arrière mais regardons en avant

*Let's stop looking back and rather look ahead*

Cependant je me dois dénoncer les grattoirs à peaux qui liment

*At the same time I owe it to myself to denounce these fleshing knives that  
file away*

La résistance de mes frères!

*The fight in my brothers!*

Ne défie pas les larmes qui trébuchent sur les tombeaux de mes ancêtres

*Do not defy the tears that stumble on the graves of my ancestors*

Que je ne connais plus

*Who I no longer know*

Connais et reconnais mon droit d'expression je t'en prierai

*Know and acknowledge my right to speak I would ask you*

Mais tu ne portes même une oreille à tes enfants tachés d'un carré de sang. . .

*But you don't even listen to your children stained with a carré<sup>4</sup> of blood*

Au nord de ma famine mes barricades se feront revendications!

*North of my hunger my roadblocks will be claims!*

Je ne suis pas une peau à vendre une nation à suspendre

*I am not a skin for sale a nation to nail*

Sur le mur d'un salon! Je te le dis tout de suite:

*On a living room wall! I'm telling you right now*

Je ne resterai pas une Crise d'Oka enfermée dans un livre d'histoire de toute façon.

*I will not remain an Oka Crisis shut away in a history book in any case.*

Et quand on me regardera

*And when you look*

On regardera un peuple uni et debout fort de la force du tonnerre.

*You will see a people united and standing strong with the strength of thunder.*

Mes chants de paix seront la sève de ma survivance fière  
*My songs of peace will be the life-blood of my proud act of survival*

Et quand on me regardera  
*And when you look*  
On regardera un peuple uni et debout devant le feu sacré de l'aurore.  
*You will see a people united and standing ahead of the sacred light of dawn*  
Je ne resterai pas une Crise d'Oka enfermée dans un livre d'histoire de toute façon!  
*I will not remain an Oka Crisis shut away in a history book in any case!*

Et si tu dors, c'est parce que mes chants de paix auront été tes berceuses  
*And if you sleep, it is because my songs of peace will have been your lullaby*  
Et la sève de ma survivance fière.  
*And the source of my proud act of survival.*

6 juillet 2012  
July 6, 2012

Signed and posted to the Internet on July 6, 2012, “Mes lames de tannage” is one of Innu poet Natasha Kanapé Fontaine’s most important slams, a slam she knows by heart and has performed at many landmark events (Kanapé Fontaine, Saint-Éloi, and Moyes n. pag.). The first video recording of it was posted as “Slam de poésie-2” in November 2012 at the time of the Rimouski book fair (Lamy, “Les poètes amérindiens” n. pag.). And it was the slam she delivered in November 2013 during a demonstration in Kanehsatake protesting government policies on resource extraction and the failure to consult Aboriginal communities about projects such as hydraulic fracturing or the transport of bitumen on their lands. Footage of Kanapé Fontaine’s performance at Kanehsatake circulated as a short video known as “Je ne resterai pas une crise d’Oka” (99%Media) and was integrated into the documentary “La charte des distractions” (99%Media), an independent film made in late 2013 in response to the highly divisive debates in Quebec on the proposed Bill 60, known as “La charte des valeurs.” “Mes lames de tannage” is also the slam Kanapé Fontaine performed in Quebec City in October 2015 at the lecture series “Creative Mornings” (“Natasha”; see also “CHOC” 21). I emphasize these platforms of performance and dissemination because a slam such as “Mes lames de tannage” is a fleeting form whose impact derives from its many instances of performance and viewing.

In what follows, I would like to engage with Kanapé Fontaine’s slam from the perspective of a settler reader who has also attempted to translate

it into English. The process of translating a writer whose mother tongue is Innu but who was raised in French outside her community of Pessamit from the age of five, a writer who works primarily in French but is also in the process of reclaiming her Innu language, brings to the fore all the pitfalls of moving between colonial languages. It is a compromised gesture, this “arrival” in English. Indeed, when I had the opportunity to participate in a panel discussion with Kanapé Fontaine and her publisher Rodney Saint-Éloi in 2016, I spoke publicly about the risk of adding another layer of colonial relations in translating her slam into English (Kanapé Fontaine, Saint-Éloi, and Moyes n. pag.). In negotiating these risks and pitfalls, I take guidance from an essay by Michèle Lacombe focusing on the translation and critical reception of Indigenous poetry written in French. Lacombe is attentive to the phenomenon “in francophone publishing circles, of co-publications, collective work, and side-by-side edited volumes in which Indigenous poets and non-Indigenous poets encounter or talk about each other’s work” (“Pimuteuat” 164-65).<sup>5</sup> It is a phenomenon that in her view serves “to sensitize a francophone readership about the legitimacy as well as the particular perspectives of Indigenous literary voices that all too often have been overlooked or distorted in the midst of ongoing French-English political and linguistic debates” (“Pimuteuat” 165). Lacombe is also at pains—in this essay and in “Indigeneity in Dialogue”—to foster dialogue between French-speaking and English-speaking Indigenous poets and writers in Canada. Although she recognizes the challenges of such dialogue, she nonetheless considers that “the work of translation cannot help but facilitate dialogue between Indigenous poets in Canada” (“Pimuteuat” 161). In responding to Lacombe’s project, I am also inspired by Renate Eigenbrod’s sense of the role of the “facilitator” (8) and it is in this spirit that I offer a translation and a discussion of Kanapé Fontaine’s slam. Translation carried out by the Innu poets themselves is preferable, Lacombe notes, but where self-translation is not a priority for the writer, academics can play a role “in promoting the work of translation” (“Pimuteuat” 161).

### **Modes of Circulation**

Although it has not been the subject of sustained analysis, “Mes lames de tannage” has been cited by a number of literary critics, including Isabelle St-Amand, Jonathan Lamy, and Sarah Henzi. The different titles given to this slam in the work of these three critics is further evidence of the fleeting quality of the form. St-Amand uses the title “L’âme en tannage” from Kanapé

Fontaine's blog "Le tannage fier des derniers vestiges territoriaux"; Lamy uses "Mes lames de tannage"; and Henzi uses "Innu Spoken Word," another sub-heading from the blog-style entry on Kanapé Fontaine's original website. My point is how fragile—and wonderfully unruly—the slam form is when approached from the standpoint of written culture. Self-published on the Internet, Kanapé Fontaine's slams change names, versions, and websites, and this makes them difficult to pin down in purely scholarly terms.<sup>6</sup> It also makes them radically engaging for readers/auditors interested in what Kanapé Fontaine calls her "poétique de la relation au territoire," a poetics at work, for example, in the oscillation between the soul, "l'âme," of one title and the blade, "lame," of another.

The modes of circulation of slam poems, in addition to making them ephemeral, also make them less likely to be translated. Kanapé Fontaine's first book of poems, *N'entre pas dans mon âme avec tes chaussures* (2012), appeared in translation in 2015, but the slams she wrote over the same period have not. Yet it is precisely because the slams exist simultaneously as poetry, performance, video, and blog/Internet post that they merit translation. They hold within them the written and the oral, the visual and the auditory, the virtual and the material, the performance and the protest, the traditional and the contemporary. Asked in a 2015 interview at the Salon du Livre de Rimouski "Why slam?" Kanapé Fontaine draws a link between slam and oral traditions, and suggests that although she had little direct transmission of her own culture growing up, the practice of slam spoke to her immediately when she encountered it at CEGEP in Rimouski around 2010 ("Entrevue"). Slam, she explains, affords the possibility of connecting with others through poetry as well as conveying ideas while playing with words, sound and rhythm ("Entrevue"). It is a politically engaged form with a declamatory power she can carry with her anywhere. This is part of the specificity of Kanapé Fontaine's slams: their delivery not just at festivals and in bars, cafés, theatres, and bookstores, but also at political demonstrations and during marches. Kanapé Fontaine takes slam outdoors, into open spaces, and into the very territories at stake in the poetry of the slams themselves.

### **"Slams territoriaux"**<sup>7</sup>

Highly charged political spaces are no stranger to slam, a practice which has historically combined oral forms and militancy. As François Paré argues in an essay on the aesthetics of slam in the border region of Gatineau-Ottawa,

Si le mouvement slam a pu trouver au sein d'autres cultures . . . un terreau favorable, c'est que sa diffusion s'accompagne d'un ensemble de préoccupations plus vastes et plus profondes sur la transmission des traditions orales, fracturées et même annihilées par le colonialisme, les migrations forcées et les guerres. En ce sens, la résurgence des pratiques de l'oralité et du spectacle en poésie contemporaine ressort bel et bien au champ politique. (93)<sup>8</sup>

Paré's essay, insofar as it underlines the importance of oral forms and of “la prise de parole” (90) in the literatures of Quebec and francophone Canada, provides a sense of what Kanapé Fontaine might have heard in the slams at her CEGEP in Rimouski. The slam poetry of the 2000s in French-language contexts, Paré argues, is shaped by a culture of storytelling, poetry reading, and song at the same time that it moves beyond these practices (90-92). The idea that slam is not a simple transcription of spoken French but rather represents “une construction culturelle de l'oralité” (91) also resonates with Kanapé Fontaine's art of writing the spoken and speaking the written.

It is not within the scope of Paré's study to explore the aesthetics of Kanapé Fontaine's “slams territoriaux,” but his article does point toward what is at stake in her appropriation of oral forms of poetry:

Il n'est pas étonnant . . . que, délaissant graduellement le livre, la poète innue Natasha Kanapé Fontaine . . . se soit jointe plus récemment au mouvement slam, car la présence de l'écrivaine sur la scène publique et médiatique semble répondre à l'urgence de dénoncer les inégalités sociales et la dépossession identitaire et territoriale auxquelles font face les communautés innues. (92)<sup>9</sup>

The challenge posed by Kanapé Fontaine's slams is to respond to the specificity of her project, that is, her poetic exploration of the interrelation of imaginary and territory. Her practice does not fit easily into settler histories of slam. It is part of an interdisciplinary, interarts practice<sup>10</sup> that actualizes for her ancient ways of relating to the land; it is not so much a contemporary form as a traditional form into which she breathes new life (“Poétique”).

### **“Poétique de la relation au territoire”**

In her 2015 lecture “Poétique de la relation au territoire” at the Centre d'art actuel Bang in Chicoutimi, Kanapé Fontaine recounts how she was inspired to political action by the blockade in Spring 2012 of Highway 138 on the north shore of the St. Lawrence estuary. In fact, she references this event in a line of “Mes lames de tannage”: “Au nord de ma famine mes barricades se feront revendications.” The blockade was organized by Innu women protesting the ravages of hydroelectrical dams built on their ancestral territory: the flooding of land by reservoirs, the rerouting of water through

canals and spillways, and the cutting of forest for kilometres of high-tension transmission lines. Kanapé Fontaine was especially moved by the women's insistence that if they allowed all this, they would have nothing to pass on to future generations; if they gave up the land, they would be giving up their heritage, the territorial basis of their culture and language. Slam, she explains, becomes a way of conveying the emotion these women carry with them in their protests as well as a way of guiding people into their bodies and their bodies into relation with the land.

In "Poétique," Kanapé Fontaine also speaks of the impact of participating in the 2014 "Marche des peuples pour la terre mère," a 700-kilometre march from Cacouna<sup>11</sup> to Kanehsatake along the St. Lawrence valley to protest marine terminals for pipelines carrying bitumen from Western Canada. Moving across the land, she explains, echoed for her with the thousands of years her people have moved on the land; and she came to see her body as her portal to the land, as a kind of intergenerational inheritance that persists in spite of the losses and lacunae she felt returning to her community of Pessamit after growing up in Baie Comeau. To be in relationship with the land for Kanapé Fontaine is not just to travel across it but also to dream it and imagine it. And insofar as her community's ancestral territory inhabits her imaginary, poetry gives her access to it. Poetry also enables her to heal the land, to imagine it unnamed, unbroken, undivided ("Poétique").

The biographical note on Kanapé Fontaine's website provides further insight into the material practices that speak through her slam: "Sa démarche artistique et littéraire tend à rassembler les peuples divergents par le dialogue, l'échange, le partage des valeurs, en passant par le 'tannage des peaux,' manière métaphorique de gratter les imperfections des pensées et des consciences" (n. pag.).<sup>12</sup> This image, she explained to students in July 2016, is drawn from an early memory of watching her grandfather skin a beaver by carefully separating skin from fat and flesh so as not to damage the pelt (Kanapé Fontaine, Saint-Éloi, and Moyes n. pag.). The slam's title refers to the knives used in this process. In the terms of the metaphor, the writer is a blade working with exactitude to transform thought and consciousness, and to bring to light the beauty of Innu philosophical practices. Genuine collaboration, Kanapé Fontaine suggests, happens by way of a mutual scraping of skins, a mutual transformation and exchange ("CHOC" 21). Poetic language is crucial to this process because it can evoke that which is not easily apprehended and make available ways of knowing that might otherwise be lost. The memory of her grandfather working the beaver skin is



foundational to "Mes lames de tannage." However, the slam does not idealise these tools; the speaker also uses the image of "grattoirs à peau" to denounce everything that undermines the fight in her people. Far from prompting nostalgia or producing artifacts, the memory inhabits the present and creates conditions of possibility for the future. Toward the end of the slam, the speaker is explicit in her refusal of any system that would turn her or her people into objects of knowledge or exchange:

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.

The word "tannage" from the slam's title, it is worth noting, conveys a sense of being completely fed up ("tannée") as well as the literal sense of tanning. As a living practice that makes reference to other living practices, Kanapé Fontaine's slam counters such processes of merchandising and reification.

### **Undoing Settler Time**

In building a space of potential community across difference, "Mes lames de tannage" invests considerable energy in creating and maintaining a strong connection between the speaker and her public. This energy is evident, for example, in the direct address of "Je te le dis tout de suite" in the passage cited above. In the opening lines, the speaker turns questions often addressed to her—questions such as "Who are you?" and "Where do you come from?"—back on the audience inviting us to confront our relationship to place while elaborating her own: "Pourquoi me demandes-tu d'où je viens / quand c'est toi-même qui m'a désarmée de mes armes de chasse?" The double movement of self-reflexivity and resistance works to destabilize the identity and location of "you," and to unsettle habitual relations of power and address. "You" is the settler who has so often asked the speaker who she is, as if that settler has precedence in this place and is more entitled to it than she. And "you" is the Innu speaker who pushes back in ways that undo settler claims of priority and entitlement. In this exchange, questions about space also turn out to be questions about time.

Subsequent stanzas maintain this intensity of address but use other strategies for holding the attention of the audience. The slam makes extensive use of pronominal verbs, that is, verbs in which the action is reflected back on the subject: "je me souviendrai," "tu te caches," "je me mets," "tu te prends," "je dois me battre." In Kanapé Fontaine's practice, such verbs create a back-and-forth movement between addressor and addressee

that fosters solidarities and serves as an invitation to self-reflexivity. There are also, especially early in the slam, a number of imperatives through which the speaker engages directly with her audience.<sup>13</sup> Two of these imperatives, “enterre-toi” and “préface-toi,” involve pronominal verbs and are worth taking time to unpack: “Enterre-toi les épreuves de mon holocauste et de mes derniers vestiges territoriaux. / Oui! Fais-toi des bibliothèques des archives sur le prologue—préface-toi l’oralité de ma mémoire.” The verb “enterrer” can operate in pronominal or non-pronominal form in the imperative: “bury the struggles” or “bury yourself.” But the two forms would not usually be used in conjunction with one another: one does not bury something *and oneself* at the same time. Similarly, one does not “preface something” and “preface oneself” at the same time. These illogical combinations are precisely what Kanapé Fontaine explores in the second stanza of her slam. And, like the questions of the first stanza, they foreground the problem of precedence, the failure of the settler colonist to see that its discourse constantly elides the priority of Indigenous people on the land.

In translating these imperatives, I have tried to render the combination of pronominal and non-pronominal forms: “Bury yourself the struggles of my holocaust and the last remains of my land. // Sure! Build yourself libraries archives on the prologue—preface yourself the orality of my memory.” In both cases, the combination emphasizes the question of *whose interests are served* in the process of writing history and producing knowledge. What is more, “préface-toi” hints at other imperatives such as “efface-toi” (erase yourself) and “fais-toi face” (face up to). Read alongside “enterre-toi” (bury yourself), these imperatives bring to the surface of public memory the attempt to erase Indigenous people from the land. It is in this context that Kanapé Fontaine’s speaker foregrounds the evasive look of the settler and asserts not only that she will remember what others forget—the genocidal designs of the settler colony—but also, and quite simply, that she will survive. The slam is a gesture of fighting back and a mechanism, through poetry, of remembering what the history books do not.

If the speaker of “Mes lames de tannage” challenges the audience to “Build yourself libraries archives on the prologue,” it is a way of highlighting the appropriation of the stories of Indigenous people. It is also a way of undermining the heavy investment of the settler colony in documenting and archiving the oral memory of Indigenous people. Prologues and prefaces are about beginnings, introductions, or openings. They are also strategies—mobilized by papal bulls, historians, translators, editors, collectors, and co-authors—for

"coming before," authorizing one's perspective and curbing the resistant potential of Indigenous texts (See Maracle 19-20; Keeshig-Tobias; McCall). In translating and analyzing Kanapé Fontaine's slam, I run the risk of framing that slam in my own terms, in settler terms. In an effort to confront that risk, to inhabit it rather than run from it, I have taken up the challenge of collaboration and reciprocity extended by Kanapé Fontaine's speaker, and listened to her poetics of relationship to the land. Regardless of these efforts and whatever their success, Kanapé Fontaine's slam comes before the translation and the analysis. Its power of oratory precedes and outstrips anything I say about it.

### **Resisting Translation**

There is one line in "Mes lames de tannage" that I did not translate. For a moment, at the beginning of the second stanza, the addressee of the slam is not the "other" who has dispossessed the speaker's community of its land, but rather the land itself: "Territoire. . . Territerre terrimaterre terrirame terrame terripagaie-moi." Densely poetic, this line interrupts the slam's opening questions and moves in the direction of chant. The terra firma of language gives way, as "territoire" breaks down into its root words and their variations. The line is not about making sense or settling on meaning, but rather about movement, sound, and rhythm. It asks that we listen to the speaker instead of seeking to know about her. In addition to internal rhymes, alliterations, and other forms of insistence, the line harbours shifters such as "toi," "ma," and "moi," which signal immediacy and familiarity. In this way, the line invites the audience into a new relationship with the land, where land is a verb ("terrir," to land) as well as a noun ("terre").

Whereas "territory" is often taken to be a claim one stakes upon the land, this line shifts the sense of land from an object over which one has title to a subject with which one is connected materially and spiritually: "terrimerre" brings into play the Latin word "mater" and "terrame" holds the French word "âme," part of the slam's original title, "L'âme en tannage." What is more, the "rame" in "terrimerre" and "terrame" can refer variously to an "oar" (or paddle), a "stake" (in agriculture), a "train" (of a metro), a "tenter" (for drying and stretching cloth), or a "ream" (of paper). In this way, the line interweaves many different technologies related to rural and urban, movement and settlement, orality and writing. The final gesture of this line is the imperative "terrripagaie-moi," where the speaker asks the land to paddle or propel her.

I made the decision not to translate this line because of the difficulty of rendering the extraordinary polysemy of words such as “rame.” But also because of my desire to leave within the English-language text some trace of French, the language of composition, and some sign that there are non-European languages and worldviews in play. I am limited in the project of translation and analysis by my inability to hear the cadence or syntax of Kanapé Fontaine’s first language, Innu, in her French-language poetry. The untranslated line becomes a way for me to make legible the potential of translation to fail and, worse, to obscure the decolonizing work of the Indigenous writer, something I return to below.

It might be argued that the line in question is part of a network of wordplay throughout the slam and should therefore be translated. The music of this line can be heard, for example, in all the words with the same root as “terre” (“terrislamme,” “territorialité,” “enterre-toi”), in words which contain the sound “ter” (“éternel,” “éter,” “existera”), and in puns such as “me (la) taire.” One colleague, concerned about what was lost in *not* translating the line, proposed “Land(rights). . . landedland landmyland landedme landme land row me,” with a preference for the word “row” over “paddle” because it contains echoes of “dispute.” The word “land” does figure in the translation of the neologism “Terrislamme-moi” as “LandSlam-me.” Yet there is no single, elegant solution for translating all of the words related to “terre”: the pronominal construction “me (la) taire,” for example, which sounds like “me la terre,” makes the earth into a verb as well as a noun, as if “me terre” is something one does to oneself, as in the expression “je me terre dans le silence.” All of these connotations resonate with Kanapé Fontaine’s practice of “territorial slam.”

### **Within the Lines**

In what ways might a practice of translation highlight rather than obscure the decolonizing work of the Indigenous writer? The case of the word “désarmée” in the first stanza of “Mes lames de tannage” comes to mind. I might have translated this word simply as “took”: “when it is you who took my hunting arms from me.” I chose “stripped” in order to foreground the vulnerability of the one whose hunting arms were taken and not just the force behind the taking. In using the word “désarmée,” Kanapé Fontaine’s speaker underlines the history of dispossession that leaves her squeezed, with little space to exist, in her own territory: “La vie l’existence entre les lignes de ma sale ignorance sur mes propres terres.” This line, the second in

the second stanza, poses several problems for translation, especially with the word “sale.”<sup>14</sup> In what sense does the speaker use the word “sale”? The most obvious translation, “shameful,” left (and continues to leave) me extremely uncomfortable. Shame is an emotion given by the other, in this case, by settlers to Indigenous people; it is a projection internalized by a people over time. For me to translate “sale” as “shameful” is to reproduce the colonizing movement of projecting shame onto Indigenous people. At the same time, this slam is not about me or my settler worries; it is about Kanapé Fontaine’s speaker, an Innu woman whose words proliferate meanings—and thereby decolonize them—rather than pinning them down.<sup>15</sup> What matters to her, more than the question of shame, is the relationship to the land and the need to take *shared* responsibility for it (“CHOC” 21).

Kanapé Fontaine’s speaker inhabits the line cited above in all its complexity. Through the reference to “ma sale ignorance *sur* mes propres terres” (my emphasis), she acknowledges that she does not know enough *of* her people and territory. At the same time, she conveys anger at being treated as ignorant *on* her own lands. The speaker’s choice of the preposition “sur” makes it possible to hear the line as an expression of the speaker’s outrage at her own ignorance, at the ignorance of settlers, and at the settlers’ projection of ignorance onto her. In the subsequent line, the speaker challenges her audience to “Terrislamme” her proof that they know more about her existence, about her lands, than she does. In other words, “sale ignorance” describes the worldview of settlers as much as that of the speaker. It implies the failure of the settler colony to admit that knowledge is grounded in relationships to the land and that there is always more than one way of coming to know.

Throughout “Mes lames de tannage,” Kanapé Fontaine’s activist slam poetics make legible what it means to be caught between different epistemologies of the land and to live “within the lines” of settler colonial imposition: “Mais voici on vit mieux sur tes villes que sur tes réserves mon peuple / Surpeuplé dans ses propres demeures délabrés renfermés.” These are the conditions of the speaker’s “sale ignorance” both *on* and *of* her own lands. But the reference to living *within the lines* is also a reference to writing, to poetry, and to what can be read *between* the lines. Along with borderlines, pipelines, hydroelectric lines, and the lines of legal documents, “l’existence entre les lignes” brings to mind traplines, storylines, lines of poetry, and lines of thought, all of which allow the speaker a wide imaginative reach. Through this multiplicity of reference, the speaker negotiates *for herself* the sovereign terms of her existence.

## Decolonizing the Beaver

In “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that any use of the verb “to decolonize” needs to be invested specifically in the repatriation of Indigenous land and life (21). With this in mind, I want to suggest that Kanapé Fontaine’s slam decolonizes the beaver, an animal featured on the coat of arms of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the coat of arms of New France, the first Canadian postage stamp, the CP rail insignia, the nickel, and the Roots logo (among others). The slam makes this intervention via the assertion “Je ne suis pas une peau à vendre une nation à suspendre” and via the direct address to settlers:

Quoi? Tu te prends pour le castor avec tes barrages tu te prends pour l’orage  
Pour détourner les rivières cesse donc de te croire maître des étendues sauvages  
Et reconnais donc notre existence!

Charged with emotion, the speaker’s questions and exclamations register frustration and disbelief, anger and laughter, at an addressee whose strategy for gaining a monopoly over the resources of the entire territory is to *ignore* Indigenous people, an addressee so busy damming waterways it cannot see its resemblance to the beaver.

At stake here is the whole myth of Canadian industry and resourcefulness, and the environmental price of believing ourselves “masters of the wilderness.” The irony, of course, is that Canada does think it’s a beaver. In the Government of Canada’s 1985 “National Symbol of Canada Act,” the beaver is enshrined as a symbol of Canadian sovereignty.<sup>16</sup> Celebrated as unaggressive, hard-working, and as a kind of wilderness engineer, the beaver is also taken to be a symbol of “Canada’s natural bounty” (White n. pag.). Kanapé Fontaine does not talk about “decolonizing” the beaver. But her slam undercuts the beaver’s symbolism as a trophy of Canadian resource extraction by returning it to its waterways and its practices of damming, and by re-appropriating it for Indigenous philosophies of life and land. The beaver figures, for example, in Kanapé Fontaine’s early memories of her grandparents’ house—in the use of fleshing knives and the smell of game (Béchar and Kanapé Fontaine 89)—and in her project of walking the land where her grandfather kept his traplines (“Réciprocité”).

Decolonization is not a metaphor, but Indigenous writers certainly mobilize poetic language in projects of decolonization. Waterways are crucial both to the poetics of “Mes lames de tannage” and to Kanapé Fontaine’s role as a Quebec spokesperson for the movement Idle No More. In Quebec, waterways were at the heart of the Spring 2012 protests of Innu women

against the hydroelectric development on the Romaine River, the January 2013 demonstrations against Bill C-38’s changes to the Environmental Assessment Act and Bill C-45’s reduction of federally protected waterways, and the demonstrations throughout 2013 and 2014 against pipelines and their scheduled marine terminals. Making common cause with Québécois slammer David Goudreault, the fourth stanza of “Mes lames de tannage” speaks to the degradation and loss of shorelines and riverbanks:

du littoral des douleurs du coeur de mes préoccupations  
L’ignorance est funèbre où est la différence je suis zèbre de langue et de couleurs  
de peaux  
Je suis blanche l’hiver et brune la terre je me mets à me (la) taire et le ciel  
Sont scindés en deux brise-rives frêles couchées sur l’éternel éther délibéré.

The last two lines remind me of the performance of “Mes lames de tannage” filmed above the dam on the Rimouski River (“Slam de poésie-2”). The dam has the effect of breaking both the horizon and the shoreline and, as the lines suggest, creates a disjointed, irreconcilable space where the usual relations between earth and sky, river and shore do not obtain. Structured like the words “brise-glace” (“ice-breaker”) or “brise-lame” (“breakwater”), the neologism “brise-rive” suggests a tool or mechanism that breaks the shore and leaves it “frail.” Yet, two lines earlier the word “préoccupations” points to Kanapé Fontaine’s ongoing and future-looking activism as well as to a time before occupation when the river was not dammed and the shoreline not broken.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

Perhaps the most memorable line from “Mes lames de tannage”—and certainly the most cited—is the speaker’s repeated assertion “Je ne resterai pas une Crise d’Oka enfermée dans un livre d’histoire de toute façon.” This line speaks to the slam’s critique of prevailing modes of knowledge production as well as to its assertion of oral forms of memory. The line conveys the speaker’s restlessness, her refusal to be relegated to the history books or to be bound by dominant narratives of the crisis. Moving beyond the terms of Oka, the slam suggests, means focusing on Indigenous resistance rather than on settler-provoked crisis. In the same way that Lee Maracle’s preface to the 1990 edition of *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* turns attention away from conflictual images of warriors and soldiers toward solidarity between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people in the Peace Camp outside the barricades at Kanehsatake, Kanapé Fontaine’s slam characterizes itself as a “chant de paix.” There is nothing innocent about

such a song of peace. Reading Kanapé Fontaine's correspondence with Deni Ellis Bécharde—along with lines such as “Enterre-toi les épreuves de mon holocauste et de mes derniers vestiges territoriaux”—makes clear the complex and painful legacy of colonial violence out of which songs of peace are offered.

Moving beyond the terms of Oka also means addressing the mutual ignorance between communities, breaking the silence of “Je me mets à me (la) taire,” and confronting the question of difference. Throughout “Mes lames de tannage,” the speaker challenges her audience to recognize the specificity of Innu history, language, and memory. And she offers some sense of her own story: what it means, for example, to be born of Innu parents, to speak French, and to have lived in Pessamit as well as in the city. If, in the words of the speaker, she is “zèbre de langue et de couleurs de peaux,” this is not to say she is “hybrid” or “mixed.” It has to do with tensions within the self: “C'est en effet une étrange vie que celle d'être toujours assise entre 'deux chaises,' de danser constamment entre deux rives” (Bécharde and Kanapé Fontaine 113). This movement back and forth is part of the work of repairing the shorelines of her self as well as the relations between communities. Language plays a crucial role in making the movement possible and, through poetry, in allowing the speaker to negotiate the dance.

On January 11, 2013, standing amidst a crowd of protesters at a demonstration organized by Idle No More in front of the Palais des Congrès in Montreal, Kanapé Fontaine addressed her fellow protesters with a slam (“11 janvier/January 2013 IDLE NO MORE”; Lamy, “Les poètes amérindiens” n. pag.). It is significant that she let poetry speak rather than making a speech—as if poetry could speak the territory on which they were standing, could reach across the crowd and voice their anger and their desire, could remember the differences among them. At this January 2013 demonstration, the Idle No More protesters wore a red feather evocative of the “carré rouge,” the red square of felt worn by student protesters in Spring 2012 (Montpetit n. pag.). In “Mes lames de tannage,” a slam written months earlier in July 2012, Kanapé Fontaine refers to these students “tachés d'un carré de sang,” a reference lamenting the failure of Quebec society to recognize and listen to them. Kanapé Fontaine's gesture of solidarity with others looking for change in Quebec anticipates the gesture of solidarity of the January 11 Idle No More demonstration. In fact, in the assertion “Je ne resterai pas une Crise d'Oka,” Kanapé Fontaine's “Mes lames de tannage” effectively anticipates the spirit of Idle No More across Canada. I do not want to suggest that Kanapé Fontaine



was the only one in tune with the growing movement. Rather, I want to note that there was a perception in Quebec in December 2012 of being “behind” in taking up the movement (Montpetit n. pag.), when in fact there were Innu women blocking Highway 138 in March and April of that same year, and there was poetry making connections among all of these acts of resistance: Oka, the “carrés rouges,” and the blockades. And I want to note that in books such as *#IdleNoMore and the Remaking of Canada* and *The Winter We Danced*, there is little evidence of the movement in Quebec. My intention here is not to critique the latter retrospectives but rather to voice the hope that projects of translating and listening to writers like Natasha Kanapé Fontaine will facilitate the process of making connections, a process that is already underway in the writers’ work.

NOTES

- 1 I am deeply grateful to Richard Cassidy, Bronwyn Haslam, Sarah Henzi, Valérie Lebrun, Marie Leconte, and Geneviève Robichaud for their readings of the translation and for their suggestions. The comments of an anonymous reviewer were also invaluable to me in revising the work.
- 2 Given the musicality of this line, I have chosen to leave it in French. This effect of defamiliarization serves as a reminder that the language of composition is French and that there are other, non-European languages at work in Natasha Kanapé Fontaine’s slam.
- 3 The speaker uses the expression “je-me-souviens” to emphasize her difference, that is, what the Quebec motto means from where she stands. An English translation of the motto would risk depriving her of the power of her gesture.
- 4 A reference to the “carré rouge,” the square of red felt worn by participants in the student protests of Spring 2012 in Quebec.
- 5 See for example the epistolary dialogue between Deni Ellis Béchard and Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, *Kuei, je te salue: conversation sur le racisme*.
- 6 Over the course of four years, the internet address of the slam in question changed from <http://mamawolffunderline.wordpress.com/innu-spoken-word/> in Autumn 2014 to <https://natashakanapefontaine.wordpress.com/2012/07/> in Summer 2015 to <https://natashakanapefontaine.com/2012/07/> in Spring 2016.
- 7 This expression is used widely by Kanapé Fontaine. See for example the biographical notes under the headings “Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, auteure en résidence” for the Centre Bang in Chicoutimi; and “Do Not Enter My Soul in Your Shoes: Natasha Kanapé Fontaine” for Mawenzi House Publishers in Toronto.
- 8 “If the slam movement has been able to find fertile ground in other cultures . . . it is because it carries with it more broadly based and deeper preoccupations with the transmission of oral traditions that have been broken, even extinguished, by colonialism, forced migration and war. In this sense, the resurgence of practices of orality and performance in contemporary poetry genuinely springs from the realm of the political.” My translation.
- 9 “It is not surprising . . . that Innu poet Natasha Kanapé Fontaine . . . has gradually moved away from the book form and recently joined the slam movement, given that her presence in the public sphere and in the media seems to respond to an urgent need to speak out

against social inequality and the loss of identity and territory faced by Innu communities.” My translation. (At the time Paré’s essay was written, it was possible to suggest that Kanapé Fontaine was gradually leaving behind the book in favour of the slam. However, her record of book publication since 2012, which includes several collections of poetry and an epistolary exchange, has kept pace with her production of slams.)

- 10 At CEGEP, as a student of visual art, she found that abstract works allowed her a similar relationship with the land (“Poétique”).
- 11 At Cacouna, Kanapé Fontaine recorded the slam, “Les jours des feux, des tambours et des meutes,” which tells the stories of the blockade and the “Marche des femmes Innues” two years earlier, in Spring 2012.
- 12 Her literary and artistic process tends to bring together divergent peoples through dialogue, exchange, and the sharing of values, by way of “tanning skins,” a metaphorical practice of scraping the imperfections from thoughts and consciences.
- 13 For example, “pagaie-moi,” “Terrislamme-moi,” “ne t’étonne pas,” “cesse donc de te croire.”
- 14 Henzi, in citing and translating the line, provides no translation for the word “sale”: “existence within the lines of [her] own ignorance / upon her own land” (102 n. 15).
- 15 Another of Kanapé Fontaine’s slams, “Amalgame de terre noire ma terre assi,” is helpful for understanding the knot of emotion carried by the words “ma sale ignorance sur mes propres terres”:

oui j’irai bien manger Enbridge et tous les autres sales carboneux  
parce que j’ai famine  
parce que j’ai famine de vivre (*Manifeste Assi* 82)

In citing this passage from “Amalgame,” I am retracing the footsteps of Henzi, who is herself following Kanapé Fontaine on a difficult return to her home territory. Attending to the speaker’s struggle with anger and complicity, Henzi argues that “Kanapé Fontaine’s return extends to a sovereignty of the body and its anchoring to the land” (93). In “Amalgame,” the speaker spells out what it means to eat “Enbridge et tous les autres sales carboneux,” that is, to internalize the economy of occupation and exploitation, a process akin to that of internalizing shame. At the same time, Kanapé Fontaine’s slam transforms the gesture into a life-giving one of taking the earth within her, of understanding the land for the way it inhabits and nourishes.

- 16 “It is hereby recognized and declared that the Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) is a symbol of the sovereignty of Canada and it is proclaimed that any representation of the Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) when used by Her Majesty in right of Canada shall be so used and so regarded” (Canada n. pag.).
- 17 The speaker’s reference to her “préoccupations” is also significant in the context of the Occupy movement, which failed to address its investment in the language and logic of North American settler-colonialism (Tuck and Yang 23).

#### WORKS CITED

- Béchar, Deni Ellis, and Natasha Kanapé Fontaine. *Kuei, je te salue: conversation sur le racisme*. Montreal: Écosociété, 2016. Print.
- Canada. “National Symbol of Canada Act.” *Revised Statutes of Canada*. 1985. 15 July 2016. Web. 16 July 2016.
- Coates, Ken. *IdleNoMore and the Remaking of Canada*. Regina: U of Regina P, 2015. Print.
- “Do Not Enter My Soul in Your Shoes: Natasha Kanapé Fontaine.” *Mawenzi House Publishers*. 1 Apr. 2015. Web. 4 July 2016.

- Eigenbrod, Renate. *Travelling Knowledges: Positioning the Im/Migrant Reader of Aboriginal Literatures in Canada*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2005. Print.
- Henzi, Sarah. “Bodies, Sovereignities, and Desire: Aboriginal Women’s Writing of Québec.” *Québec Studies* 59 (2015): 85-106.
- Kanapé Fontaine, Natasha. “Biographie—Natasha Kanapé Fontaine.” *natashakanapefontaine.com*. 1 June 2016. Web. 4 June 2016.
- . *Bleuets et abricots*. Montreal: Mémoire d’encrier, 2016. Print.
- . “CHOC.” Transcription Jonathan Lamy. *Affirmation Autochtone*. Spec. issue of *Inter. Art actuel* 122 (2016): 21. Print.
- . *Do Not Enter My Soul in Your Shoes*. Trans. Howard Scott. Toronto: Mawenzi House, 2015. Print.
- . “Entrevue avec Natasha Kanapé Fontaine.” CIA Mistral. *YouTube*. 8 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 June 2016.
- . *Manifeste Assi*. Montreal: Mémoire d’encrier, 2014. Print.
- . “Marche des peuples #3 - Slam de Natasha Kanapé Fontaine devant Cacouna.” OD A. *YouTube*. 17 May 2014. Web. 4 July 2016.
- . “Mes lames de tannage.” *natashakanapefontaine.com*. 6 July 2012. Web. 1 Apr. 2016.
- . “Natasha Kanape Fontaine.” CreativeMornings HQ. 2 Nov. 2015 *YouTube*. Web. 5 July 2016.
- . *N’entre pas dans mon âme dans tes chaussures*. Montreal: Mémoire d’encrier, 2012. Print.
- . “Poétique de la relation au territoire” *natashakanapefontaine.com*. 30 Apr. 2015. Web. 16 June 2016.
- . “Slam de poésie-2.” CogecoTV Quebec. *YouTube*. 15 Nov. 2012. Web. 15 June 2016.
- Kanapé Fontaine, Natasha, and Kathia Rock. “11 janvier/January 2013 IDLE NO MORE.” Eric Pouliot-Thisdale. *YouTube*. 11 Jan. 2013. Web. 18 June 2016.
- Kanapé Fontaine, Natasha, Rodney Saint-Éloi, and Lianne Moyes. “Réciprocité et création collective.” Panel Discussion. CÉRIUM International Graduate Summer School. “Réciprocité et décolonisation: Rapports à l’œuvre dans les processus de création autochtones.” Université de Montréal, 7 July 2016.
- Keeshig-Tobias, Lenore. “Stop Stealing Native Stories.” 1990. *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. Ed. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997: 71-73. Print.
- The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, ed. *The Winter We Danced: Voices From the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*. Winnipeg: ARP, 2014. Print.
- Lacombe, Michèle. “Pimuteuat/Ils marchent/They Walk’: A Few Observations on Indigenous Poetry and Poetics in French.” *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*. Ed. Neal McLeod. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2014. 159-182. Print.
- Lacombe, Michèle, Heather MacFarlane, and Jennifer Andrews. “Indigeneity in Dialogue: Indigenous Literary Expression Across Linguistic Divides / L’autochtonie en dialogue: l’expression littéraire autochtone au-delà des barrières linguistiques.” Introduction. Spec. dossier of *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne* 35.2 (2010): 5-12. Print.
- Lamy, Jonathan. “Les poètes amérindiens sur la place publique.” *Hors les murs: perspectives décentrées sur la littérature québécoise contemporaine*. Spec. dossier of *Salon double*. 21 Oct. 2014. Web. 18 June 2016.
- . “Oka/Kanehsatake: 25 ans plus tard.” *Affirmation Autochtone*. Spec. issue of *Inter. Art actuel* 122 (2016): 61. Print.
- Maracle, Lee. *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*. Toronto: Women’s, 1990. Print.

- McCall, Sophie. *First Person Plural: Aboriginal Storytelling and the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2011. Print.
- Montpetit, Caroline. "Idle No More—Les plumes rouges sortent dans la rue." *Le Devoir*. 9 Jan. 2013. Web. 15 July 2013.
- "Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, auteure en residence." *Centre d'art actuel Bang*. March 2015. Web. 1 June 2016.
- 99%Media. "La charte des distractions." *99media.org*. 14 Feb. 2014. Web. 30 June 2016.
- 99%Media. "Je ne resterai pas une crise d'Oka." *courtscritiques.com*. 6 Dec. 2013. Web. 15 June 2016.
- Paré, François. "Esthétique du slam et de la poésie orale dans la région frontalière de Gatineau-Ottawa." *Voix et images* 40.2 (2015): 89-103. Print.
- St-Amand, Isabelle. *La crise d'Oka en récits: territoire, cinéma et littérature*. Quebec: Presses de l'Université de Laval, 2015. Print.
- Tuck, Eve and K. Wang Yang. "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40. Print.
- White, Shelley. "The Beaver as National Symbol: Why is a Furry Mammal Still An Emblem of Canada?" *The Huffington Post Canada*. 1 July 2011. Web. 16 July 2016.

