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Tawâyihk: Thoughts from the Places in Between

Sherry Farrell Racette

Sherry Farrell Racette teaches in the Department of Native Studies of the University of Manitoba.
—Sherry.FarrellRacette@umanitoba.ca

I am a member of Timiskaming First Nation in northwestern Quebec, but I've never lived there; I grew up in Manitoba. The various routes between the prairies and Quebec are familiar to me, having travelled them since I was two years old. Moving back and forth, finding and negotiating *tawâyihk*—the places in between—is something I've done all my life.¹ It has given me a vantage point I've come to value.

My grandmother, Ellen King, was born in 1905 on Timiskaming First Nation. She was a child of northern Métis and Algonquin people whose roots in the region were deep and expansive. Her mother, Annie Polson, was born on the shores of Lake Timiskaming in 1874, a mere four years after the Hudson's Bay Company's colonial administration transferred the region to Canada. When she married in 1885, it was still part of the Northwest Territories. The year my grandmother was born, the border between Quebec and Ontario was finalized. Included in the negotia-

tions and legislation creating that border was a section that stipulated the government of Canada would transfer its responsibilities to sign treaties with "Indians" to the province of Quebec. It never happened. Ignored or forgotten, Quebec was on the verge of a modern gold rush. A network of mining towns sprang up on Algonquin hunting territories on both sides of the new Quebec-Ontario border: Kirkland Lake, Timmins, Rouyn, Noranda, and to the north, Val-d'Or.

Many First Nations within Quebec are Francophone, but not all. My grandmother didn't speak French. There were relatively few Quebecois living in the region during her childhood. Until the late nineteenth century, there was only a fur trade post and a mission established for the benefit of Algonquin and Métis families. But on the heels of a Catholic colonization project and a series of dodgy land deals that profited Indian agents and local businessmen on both sides of the provincial boundary, the reserve lost significant land,

gradually becoming an island in the midst of its own territory. And it is, like Kahnawake and Kahnésatake to the south, primarily an Anglophone island.

For Indigenous peoples, English and French are the echoes of our colonial histories. Speaking them, we are often painfully aware of the languages we don't voice or voice imperfectly. English is a political trigger in Quebec and often an emotional one, but for Anglophone Indigenous communities, English serves as a protective border from the hegemony of Quebec, just as the Quebecois see the French language as protection from the hegemony of Canada. Few people in Quebec realize the heavy burden French carries among Indigenous people in the West. A simple phrase can retrigger trauma for former students of residential schools. Many of the priests and nuns were from Quebec, and they left few fond memories behind. For many, French is the language of abuse. I have been scolded for using

1. I am drawing on Cree language concepts, closely related to the Algonquin language, in part because of my time at First Nations University of Canada during the emergence of critical language-based concepts brought forward by Cree colleagues Willie Ermine, Neal McLeod, Keith Goulet, and others.

a single French phrase in a meeting. In another instance, an elder literally shook with rage upon hearing French. French is seen as utterly un-Indigenous, which can result in an inability to relate to, support, or engage with Indigenous people in Quebec who speak French.

As an adult moving from the prairies to Montreal, I was struck by the comparative invisibility of Indigenous peoples. While we had made hard-fought gains in education, law, land claims, and cultural recognition elsewhere, Quebec and its institutions seemed strangely oblivious or resistant. I had a great job with wonderful colleagues, but I was astonished to discover I was one of only two full-time Indigenous faculty in the entire city (both of us in the same faculty at the same university).

Initially I felt I had travelled back in time. Looking forward to the opportunity to study the Algonquin language, I was astonished to discover that outside of departments of linguistics and anthropology, Indigenous language education and Indigenous Studies were non-existent in post-secondary institutions. Outside of Quebec, Native/Indigenous Studies emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970s, first with individual courses, followed by the establishment of Departments of Native Studies at Trent University

(1972), University of Manitoba (1974), Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC, now First Nations University of Canada) at the University of Regina (1976), University of Saskatchewan (1983), and University of Alberta (1986).² The Department of Indian Art, now Department of Indigenous Art, at SIFC, under the leadership of artist Bob Boyer, pioneered the teaching of traditional and contemporary arts and art history. Boyer was also among a group of artists who formed SCANA, the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry, which lobbied national, provincial, and regional art institutions for full inclusion. The Canada Council established the Aboriginal Arts secretariat in 1994, creating several new grant categories and a commitment to representation on juries. Provincial arts councils and arts organizations followed suit. Like many others, I have served on an array of national and provincial committees and juries. The struggle for representation has not been smooth but it has become an important part of our collective lives as artists, curators, and art historians, and it provides important opportunities for dialogue with non-Indigenous colleagues. Except in Quebec. Quebec currently stands alone in the absence of Indigenous representation on juries and of designated arts funding to support the development of vital, artistic Indigenous voices.

Demographics may partially account for the difference. In Saskatchewan, for example, according to 2014 statistics, there are 144,995 registered status First Nations with an additional 52,450 Métis, within a provincial population of 1.13 million (17.5%), whereas the 87,091 First Nations and 11,640 Inuit living in Quebec are a mere 1.2% of the total population of 8.22 million.³ We lack the critical presence for political strength.

The longevity of settlement is an additional factor. In the rest of Canada, particularly on the prairies, the treaties increasingly define relationships with First Nations. Provincial treaty commissions and accompanying initiatives in treaty education have given rise to the statement “We are all treaty people” as a guiding principle and strategy for exploring a relationship we hold in common, since it was the signing of the treaties that facilitated post-fur trade settlement. Significant settlement did not begin until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lacking the jurisdictional traction of the treaty relationship and a substantive, visible population, how do we initiate change in Quebec? Because change is sorely needed, as *of the North* (2015) has made painfully and publicly clear.

Is there anyone unaware of the ongoing debacle that began with the screening of Dominic Gagnon’s *of the*

2. First People’s Studies was approved as a major at Concordia University in 2009.

3. First Nations in Saskatchewan, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada website, www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100020587/1100100020591; Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations, Métis and Inuit, Statistics Canada website, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/99-011-x2011001-eng.cfm>; Aboriginal population in Quebec 2012, Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones Québec website, http://www.autochtones.gouv.qc.ca/nations/population_en.htm.

North at the Montreal International Documentary Festival in November 2015? In this 74-minute film, his longest to date, Gagnon creates visual collages by appropriating YouTube videos showing northern Indigenous peoples. His method has been touted as revealing “the lonely, shocking margins of YouTube,” and because he hunts and bags footage flagged for removal, his work is typically discussed as challenging notions of copyright and censorship, and as redefining cinema.⁴ In descriptions for festival programs, Gagnon and his distributors include choice phrases such as “trashy and unbridled acculturation” and “the descendants of Nanook in the process of making their own cinema.”⁵ It is a powerful and telling irony that Gagnon won the Prix du Jury Régionyon at Switzerland’s Visions du Réel festival largely on the basis of the musical score he had pirated from the Inuit throat singer Tanya Taquq: after Taquq threatened legal action, her music was removed. Apparently we need to remind people that Inuit artists have been producing their own television, film, and music since the 1970s, and that it is protected under copyright law.⁶

The response to Gagnon’s film in the national and international Indigenous arts community has been one of shock and dismay. We were particularly stupefied by the exist-

ence of a project that seemed to expose how widely racism and ignorance must be ingrained in Quebec arts institutions and how deeply the concerns and processes now widely integrated into artistic and curatorial practices outside of Quebec have not been addressed. “How?” was the fundamental question—not “Why?” How did this receive funding? How did this get by a jury? The fundamental struggle in Indigenous representation is our right to be behind the camera, our right to create our own stories. Gagnon’s wild reaches into YouTube’s netherworld combine sex tapes from Alaska with the Canadian Arctic, representing it all as Inuit. Who cares? It’s all the same, right? How is it that a serious conversation on Indigenous representation and inclusion in curation and jury selection has happened everywhere but Quebec? How is it that a critical look at Quebec’s own history of colonialism, beyond British conquest, is a taboo subject?

Although Inuit artists first picked up the camera in the early twentieth century (with photographers such as Peter Pitseolak and his family) and refused television until they could create their own programming, Inuit filmmakers are underrepresented at film festivals, even at Toronto’s ImagineNATIVE. Zacharias Kunuk, whose *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* won

best first feature at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, started Igloodik Isuma productions in 1990 to address the need for Inuit-focused, Inuit-produced film and television. Clearly there is much work to be done. But compare the *of the North* screening to the Toronto International Film Festival’s handling of *The Legend of Sarila*, which opened the 2013 festival and was chosen as a “TIFF Industry Case Study” to provide an opportunity to discuss the challenges of representing Inuit culture throughout all stages of the project’s development.⁷

The response to *of the North* criticism within Quebec arts discourse, at least through public media, initially emphasized artistic freedom and respect for an individual’s particular oeuvre, suggesting that the film “confronts stereotypes” rather than perpetuates them.⁸ For the Indigenous arts community, the debacle bled into two other media events: the release of Adam Chandler’s Netflix production, *The Ridiculous 6* (December 6), and a Miss Universe contestant strutting the stage in a glitzy totem pole as an expression of her “Canadian” heritage (December 22). The artistic merit of the three was considered the same—very low indeed. It was a rough month, a sobering reality check to close the year.

On January 12, 2016, Inuit filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril

4. J.P. Sniedecki as cited on Dominic Gagnon’s website, *Visions*, <http://www.visionsmtl.com/dominic-gagnon.html>.

5. These quotations from *of the North* captions recur in the DokuFest, *Visions du Réel*, and Camden International Film Festival programs.

6. See David Posey and William Hansen’s *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*, a documentary film on the history of Inuit broadcasting, Icarus Film, 1991.

7. TIFF.net Case Study: *The Legend of Sarila*, 2014, <http://tiff.net/industry-14/tiffkidsindustry/case-study-legend>.

8. Barry Walsh, “RIDM responds to ‘of the North’ controversy,” *RealScreen*, posted November 27, 2015, <http://realscreen.com/2015/11/27/ridm-responds-to-of-the-north-controversy/>.

launched a social media campaign against *of the North*, issuing a challenge to her community and asking for a flood of Inuit video clips:

CALLING ALL INUIT: Let's hijack the #OfTheNorth hashtag and use it to project how WE want to be seen... Let's show the world that there are more positive clips of Inuit online than there are negative ones! Share your favourite online videos of Inuit, and use the hashtags #Inuit and #OfTheNorth. This way, when people search for videos about Inuit, or search for his film, they will see what WE choose to show the world, instead of what some ignorant guy in Quebec wants them to think.⁹

Her words reflect the anger in the Inuit community, and her heroic efforts appear to be paying off. But we have a larger challenge before us.

An informed critical discussion of Indigenous arts requires a certain knowledge base and an openness to learn, reconsider, and rethink. While *of the North*, with its brash, obvious (and intentional) transgressions facilitates a straightforward, albeit angry, exchange, the recent response to Bénédicte Ramade's review of *The Rebel Yells: Dress and Political Re-dress in Contemporary Indigenous Art* at Concordia's FoFA gallery illustrates the more subtle difficulties in giving and receiving critical discourse across linguistic and cultural divides.

The curators, Lori Beavis and Rhonda Meier, centred their exhibition around the woman in Shelley Niro's well-known photograph, *The Rebel* (1991), selecting artworks in a "call and response" to the subject's imagined rebel yell. Ramade, a French art historian and curator living in Montreal, and author of the exhibition's sole review (published in *Ciel Variable*), begins by summoning Barthes and Saussure to frame her discussion of dress as it relates to the exhibition. Reading the English translation, I'm not sure if she does so to marshal her ultimate dismissal of the exhibition or simply demonstrate that she "gets" dress. The subsequent reaction to the review focuses primarily on her unfortunate juxtaposition of Indigenous peoples with British punk rock subculture, a comparison woven throughout the text.¹⁰ Her more interesting points on the actual dress deployed in the artworks and a critical shot at the curatorial turn in exhibitions are subsequently lost in reactions to the representation of our collective nations as a "subculture." This can partially be laid at the editorial door of *Ciel Variable* who strategically placed the phrase in a pull-quote that immediately draws the reader's eye. What is one to think?

The *Rebel Yells* was a small-scale exploration of an important conversation. The curatorial essays focus

on the "touchstone" image and the legacy of visual resistance sampled in the works of eleven artists.¹¹ The discourse around the single review is simultaneously a reminder of critical neglect, multiple knowledge gaps, and—possibly—issues of translation. The exhibition catalogue, which offers texts in both French and English, focuses inward, and in retrospect, it raises some important questions. Do those of us within the world of Indigenous arts believe that others can easily understand the importance of images we know and love? Do we assume familiarity with a body of art history and criticism written in English? Is it fair to expect curators to anticipate knowledge gaps and resistance? Is it even possible? Ramade compared *The Rebel Yells* to *Beat Nation*, which had a stop at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in the fall of 2013.¹² The comparison is shaky, but the paucity of Quebec exhibitions featuring Indigenous artists and, more importantly, focused on ideas central to contemporary Indigeneity leave reviewers with few comparisons and fewer opportunities to engage with the experience of seeing Indigenous perspectives at the heart of an exhibition.

While I absolutely agree with concerns raised in Letters to the Editor written by artist Hannah Claus and curator Lori Beavis, we must

9. Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, Facebook post, January 12, 2016.

10. Bénédicte Ramade, "Do the Clothes Make the Man," originally published in *Ciel variable* 101 (Autumn 2015): 56–63, is now posted with Letters to the editor by Hannah Claus and Lori Beavis on the magazine's website, <http://cielvariable.ca/en/reactions-to-the-article-on-the-exhibition-the-rebel-yells/>.

11. Rhonda Meier, "Rebels, Causes," *The Rebel Yells: Dress and Political Re-dress in Contemporary Indigenous Art* (Montreal, 2015), 12.

12. Originally an online project of Vancouver's Grunt Gallery curated by Tania Willard and Skeena Reese in 2008, *Beat Nation: Art, Hip-Hop and Aboriginal Culture* toured various sites in Canada from 2009 until 2014. See *Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture*, www.beatnation.org/ and Grunt Gallery: *Beat Nation*, grunt.ca/beatnation/.

acknowledge Ramade for actually writing a review. It has been exceedingly difficult for Indigenous curators and artists to receive critical attention in Quebec. To that end, in addition to her letter posted on the *Ciel Variable* website, Hannah Claus's social media comments should be given wider circulation:

The curators and the artists...deserved better. It was a fabulous show with an original and engaging curatorial premise. I only wish more people could have seen it. Please curate more like this... [G]iven the sole review published on this exhibition, clearly more needs to be done.¹³

More. A simple enough strategy, but absolutely key: more exhibitions, larger audiences and more writing—greater opportunities to learn, to talk, and to argue. For if we ask people to change how they think about us, we are also asking them to change how they think about themselves. To move us from the margins, or complete absence, to the centre—which is how we see ourselves. That is a very long way from the occasional inclusive gesture, which in itself has been hard fought to attain.

The longevity of Quebec's settler culture, with its deep roots over centuries and its legacy of double colonialism will not be disrupted as easily as it can be on the prairies. But one aspect is fundamentally the same.

The construction of Indigenous peoples as pitiable, exotic, vanishing, or as barriers to resource extraction in national narratives of "progress" is a critical cornerstone in both Canadian and Quebec identities. It seems we are tethered to our mutual histories of colonialism. The arts can play a key role in the process of decolonization and the unravelling of those ideas, but change is not easy.

It is my fear that regardless of corrective actions taken by Dominic Gagnon, the discourse around *of the North* may only serve to tighten an artistic community that is already closed to engagement with Indigenous arts and artists. I imagine scornful conversations, stereotypes repeated, and resentments voiced. I wonder about the safety of Indigenous filmmakers within Quebec, and where our allies are. I know they exist, but are they silenced? Outnumbered? Vulnerable? Or are they gathering strength?

I have seen a glimpse of those allies. In my Indigenous research methods and art history classes, a small but steady stream of students from Quebec and France seek alternatives to the theoretical frameworks and literatures available to them. In particular, they seek Indigenous epistemologies and methodological approaches. But the need for engagement goes both ways. From my vantage point, the English language

envelope is also limiting. Important artists, practices, landmark events, and exhibitions in Quebec are often missing from the larger narrative of "Canadian" Indigenous art history. Influences and interconnections are simply ignored and gradually forgotten. That is why something as simple as an unfavourable review and two responses on *Ciel Variable's* website offer a small opportunity. Read in conjunction with the exhibition catalogue, there is the potential to open up a much larger dialogue for those willing to see these disparate bilingual elements as dialogic tools. We must find ways to connect our respective discourses.

Critical to any potential conversation is a fundamental awareness of *why* Indigenous peoples react so strongly to degrading representations and comparisons. This is not a question of "sensitivity"—the unanticipated "we did not intend to offend." This is about the cumulative impacts of dehumanizing representation on our lives in the present. There is a substantive body of literature on these impacts, beginning with Rayna Green's seminal "The Pocahontas Perplex" (1975) and including *The White Man's Indian* (Berkhof, 1978), *The Imaginary Indian* (Francis, 1992), *Photographic Memoirs of an Aboriginal Savant* (Tsinhanhjinnee, 1994), and more recently *Decolonizing the Lens of*

13. Hannah Claus, Facebook post, January 22, 2016.

14. Essential reading includes: Rayna Green, "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture," *Massachusetts Review* 16 (Autumn 1976): 698-714; Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York, 1978); Marcia Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," in Stan Douglas, ed., *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art* (Vancouver, 1991); Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver, 1992); Frances Peters-Little, *Return of the Noble Savage: Aboriginal Representation in the Australian Film and Television Industry* (Acton, Australia, 2009); Hulleah Tsinhanhjinnee, *Photographic Memoirs of an Aboriginal Savant: Living on Occupied Land*, artist book (Hanover, NH, 1994); Kerstin Knopf, *Decolonizing the Lens of Power: Indigenous Films in North America* (Amsterdam and New York, 2008); Denise Cumings, *Visualities: Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art* (East Lansing, MI, 2011).

15. Shelby Loft, "Decolonizing Indigenous Women's (In)Visibility of Involvement in Sex Work Practice," Rising Up: A Graduate Student Conference in Indigenous Studies, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, March 5, 2016.

16. Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, "Of the North Screening Cancelled," Facebook post, March 4, 2016.

17. Willie Ermine is a member of Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, and faculty member of First Nations University of Canada, whose work as an ethicist and researcher for the Indigenous People's Health Research Centre has been critical in changing research ethics and research relationships with Indigenous communities across Canada and beyond. His Cree interpretation of Robert Poole's *Towards Deep Subjectivity* (1972) formed the basis of his thesis, as well as several talks and pub-

Power (Knopf, 2008).¹⁴ Has this conversation been conducted entirely in English? Is it primarily taught within Indigenous Studies and Indigenous art history? The resulting conceptual chasm places all those engaged in presenting/representing Indigenous peoples in jeopardy. How can we have meaningful dialogue without a common understanding of these larger discussions?

At *Rising Up*, a recent Indigenous Studies conference, Shelby Loft, a young Mohawk scholar from Queen's University, delivered her paper in front of a large, double-screen projection of the results of a Google image search. Supported by the overwhelming visual evidence of hypersexualized women in skimpy buckskins, she stated "'Indian' bodies are only useful for white consumption,"¹⁵ echoing Alethea Arnaquq-Baril's critique of a hastily organized (and later cancelled) panel discussion scheduled to follow an *of the North* screening in Montreal:

Make no mistake, this screening is not about having important dialogue about the state of life for Inuit people. It is about what rights a white man has to do and say whatever he wants about anyone he wants, no matter how much damage he will inflict.¹⁶

For us, recognition of our humanity and our fight to regain control of how our bodies are represented—our ada-

mant collective refusal to continually serve as subjugated exotic bodies for white consumption—is simply not up for discussion.

This is not, of course, the first time Indigenous peoples have found themselves at a critical impasse with the values and practices embedded within cultural institutions. We might learn from other disciplines and their struggles to engage Indigenous communities in non-destructive, helpful ways. Willie Ermine's Cree interpretation of "ethical space" could potentially provide a conceptual framework to begin the tentative process of seeking resolution.¹⁷ His ideas have gained significant traction in both science and education as a means to create spaces for productive dialogue beyond binary, competitive notions of debate. Ermine suggests that *tawâiyihk*—the "elusive spaces between entities"—can be expanded into a kind of intellectual neutral ground that we can enter as human beings open to listening and learning from each other.¹⁸ However, he asks us to return to some rather idealistic, philosophical premises that are worlds away from *of the North*.

Beyond the cliché that Indigenous languages have no word for "art," there are words for artists and creativity. In the Cree and larger Algonquian paradigm, artists are engaged in important intellectual, spiritual,

and emotional work. To be creative, *kâ-mamâtâwisinâk mamâhtâwi*, and to be *kâ-mamâhtâwisiwak*, "a creative one," is to tap into the power of the universe.¹⁹ Knowledge, Ermine reminds us, is sought through the heart as much as the mind. To enter Ermine's ethical space is to become vulnerable, and it is not for the faint of heart. It foregrounds respect—*iysi ni kat tuwin*, "how we treat each other."²⁰ These are not romantic, abstract ideas, but lived praxis that moves us beyond ego-driven individualism and toward responsibility for each other, the broader world, and ourselves. Ethical spaces of engagement are not based on oppositional stances. They begin with compassion, mutual interest, and openness. Each participant must leave the security of familiar intellectual frameworks and practices with the purpose of seeking common ground, to move away from the impasse, and to create mutually intelligible language.

Having been asked to write this "polemic" essay, I can only conclude that such people, however few, do exist. To those brave souls, if the current place of Indigenous arts and artists is to change in Quebec, we have much work ahead of us. We must, as Hannah Claus asks us, "do more." There is art to make, curate, and discuss. There is a phenomenal task of translation and relationship

building. There are hard questions to explore. But it is time to seek *tawâiyihk*, the places in between. And for those traversing these narrow passage-ways, hopefully to meet in respectful "ethical spaces" of dialogue, we need to ensure *tawâstew*—the passage is safe. ¶

lications. See William Ermine, "A Critical Examination of Ethics in Research Involving Indigenous Peoples," MEd Thesis, University of Saskatchewan 2000; "Mapping of Knowledge Translation: Working in the Ethical Space," in Nili Kaplan-Myrth and Janet Smylie, eds., *Sharing What We Know About Living a Good Life: Indigenous Knowledge Translation Summit Report*, http://ahrnets.ca/files/2010/05/Final_Summit_Report_Sept_3_1PHRC_KT.pdf, p. 34–36; and "The Ethical Space of Engagement," *Indigenous Law Journal* 6, 1 (2007): 193–203.

18. Ermine, "The Ethical Space of Engagement," 194.

19. *Megwetch* to Cree artist, poet, and language scholar, Neal McLeod, for his assistance with correct spelling and use of these terms. Neal McLeod, personal communication with the author, March 9, 2016. See Willie Ermine's "Aboriginal Epistemology," in Marie Battiste and Jean Barman, eds., *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds* (Vancouver, 1995) for a discussion of *mamatowisowin* as "the capacity to connect to the life force" related to artistic talent and giftedness.

20. Willie Ermine, Ethical Space Educational Presentation, Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre, slide 6, "Iysi ni kat tuwin," and slide 15, "Knowledge has to inform the heart," Regina SK, April 13, 2009.