

# THE SURVIVANCE IN THE LITERATURE OF THE FIRST NATIONS IN CANADA

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**Abstract:** The article examines the way the writers of the First Nations in Canada deal with the issue of survivance which implies a collective resilience. It is based upon a comparison between the first novel of Naomi Fontaine, *Kuessipan* (2011) and the poetry of Rita Mestokosho collected in *How I see Life, Grandmother, Eshi Uapataman Nukum, Comment je perçois la vie, grand-mère* (2011). Both writers belong to a tradition of *littérature autochtone* in Québec that has become more and more visible since the 1980s. If both writers share the paradigm of decoloniality, their aesthetics remains classical with the use of a minimalist style to express the beauty of the Innu way of life.

**Keywords:** survivance, invisibility, Innu, poetic, First Nations

## INTRODUCTION

In one of his last seminars, Jacques Derrida (2000) introduced the notion of survivance, which he associated with the future of generations. Whereas the idea of survival expressed, in his view, the individual aspect, survivance could reveal a form of transgenerational solidarity. The perspective of survivance is clearly associated with the idea of loss; there is a notion of remembrance of beloved people.

But how can the survivor speak in friendship about the friend, without a ‘we’ slipping in indecently, incessantly? without a ‘we’ even demanding, in the name of friendship, to be heard, precisely? For to silence or to forbid the ‘we’ would be to enact another, no less serious, violence. The injustice would be at least as great as that of still saying ‘we’. (Derrida, 2000: 28)

In other words, the survivance echoes the idea of a posthumous tribute and for Derrida, the first proof of an intimate solidarity emerges with the possibility of saying ‘we’ as a collective entity. The strong links beyond life and death are also dealt with in the literature of the First Nations, but in this case, the survivance expresses the posterity of a collective trauma. Jacques Derrida dealt with the Latin root of the word posthumous, *post-humus* which is something that disappears and is mixed with different elements in the soil. The First Nations is the official category used in Canada to classify all the indigenous communities such as the Innu, the Cree, Chipewyan and other communities. The emergence of indigenous literature has been attested at the end of the 1960s (Moura, 2005: 16)

when these minorities began to claim their cultural rights in Canada (Brubaker, 2001). In the spiritual survivance of the First Nations, there is a mixture of collective memories that are re-membered and reincorporated into the actions of new generations. 'Native American Indian literature is not a newcomer in the course of literary resistance to dominance. Natives have resisted discovery and dominance for centuries, from the first stories of touch and breach of trust' (Vizenor, 2009: 8). In other words, the survivance characterizes a postgenocide attitude that all the members of these minorities have. For Vizenor, the survivance is different from the survival, it is a fundamental refusal of victimization; on the contrary, the survivance aims at reminding the ancestral traditions that help to heal the deep wounds caused by the social and historical erasure of the indigenous communities (Logan, 2014: 149).

The expression *cultural genocide* was used in the report of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (henceforth: TRC) which was established as a result of the Statement of Reconciliation of 7 January 1998 to collect evidences about the residential situation of Indigenous children (TRC, 2015). The commission illustrated the institutionalization of memory as an attempt to analyze the consequences of such an official violence against First Nations communities (McDonald, 2017: 168). The hypothesis here is that literary texts from the First Nations reveal an attempt to create a counter-narrative on the daily life of the indigenous communities (Bhabha, 1994: 66) where the resistance to the official narratives is expressed in a poetic style. These writers use the language of the colonizer in order to address a message on the future of the First Nations. A counter-narrative illustrates the emergence of a literature that gives a strong voice to the indigenous communities who were deprived of expression.

This hypothesis will be tested with the help of two women writers, Rita Mestokosho and Naomi Fontaine, that are quite representative of the Innu literature in Québec. Both writers refer to the space of reservations where these communities were grouped and describe the difficulty of transmitting the core values and principles of a culture which was erased. In fact, the transmission of these values is a crucial question for the resilience of the Innu identity. The transmission needs to be ensured, this is why aesthetics is used in a pedagogical perspective (Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017: 5). The aim of these writers is to create an alternative narrative on the life of the Innu people. They have to write themselves to avoid outside voices and a negative process of othering (Loiseau, 2010: 1012) where the Innu identity is categorized in negative public policies (revitalization, alcoholism). Gerald Vizenor, a native American Indian, showed the fundamentals of a colonial narrative that is prevailing in most of Western societies. The historical periodization is founded on an initial trauma that opens up the Modern times.

The Heirs of Christopher Columbus created one more New World in their stories and overturned the tribal prophecies that their avian time would end with the arrival of the white man. The heirs warm

the stones at the tavern with their stories in the blood. The tavern is on the natural rise of a meadow, and tribal panic holes are sown near the mount. The House of Life is on the descent to the headwaters, the burial ground for the lost and lonesome bones that were liberated by the heirs from museums. (Vizenor, 1991: 5)

All the First Nations are aware of this narrative which is transmitted throughout the generations. Some authors claimed that there was a revival of the literature of the First Nations in Canada in the 1980s with an increasing production of books (Giroux, 2008: 30). Many members of the First Nations used literary texts as forms of cultural production to re-empower the self-perception of these communities (Premat, 2017: 74). If the Innu community is often perceived in its political dimension, there is also a textual specificity in this literature. The Innu literature tends to select the poetic form as a strategic choice to express the resilience of the Innu identity. The poetic form is characterized by the use of nominal phrases, aphorisms and short meanings. In order to test this hypothesis, two recent books will be analyzed, the first book written in French by Naomi Fontaine, *Kuessipan* (2011, 113 pages) and the collection of poetry written in a trilingual edition (Innu, French and English) by Rita Mestokosho, *How I see Life, Grandmother / Eshi Uapataman Nukum / Comment je perçois la vie, grand-mère* published in the same year, 2011 (95 pages). The study will focus on the comparison of the texts, the profile of publishing houses *Mémoire d'encrier* and *Beijbom Books* and some selected interviews with the authors.

## 1. THE INNU LITERATURE IN QUÉBEC

The Innu community represents today around 15000 persons divided into nine villages. They live in the region Basse-Côte-Nord along the river St. Lawrence in the Northeastern Québec. The classification of the writers of the First Nations is not easy, some scholars referring to a general term such as indigenous literature (Boudreau, 1993: 15), others preferring the term of *littérature autochtone* (Saint-Amand, 2010; Chartier, 2015: 20) to categorize the writers of the First Nations that live in Québec (Assiniwi, 1989: 46). Assiniwi is a writer of the First Nations, he used *littérature autochtone* to distinguish it from the other provinces of Canada. The researchers opting for indigenous literature seem to perceive this style in a more generic way (Machet, 1999: 16) close to ethnopoetics, which means the use of poetry to express ancestral traditions (Beaujour, 1989: 210). As Gerald Vizenor wrote,

In the oral tradition, the mythic origins of tribal people are creative expressions, original eruptions in time, not a mere recitation or a recorded narrative in grammatical time. The teller of stories is an artist, a person of wit and imagination, who relumes the diverse memories of the visual past into the experiences and metaphors of the present. (Vizenor, 1984: 7)

Ethnopoetics focuses on the performance of these artists that contribute to the transmission of values, beliefs and attitudes. For some of the writers, the term *autochthonous* echoes to 'Indian' and refers to the imposition of categories and names (Mestokosho, 2009; Momaday, 2010) by the colonizers (Caron, 2012: 12). As Rita Mestokosho said,

I made some research on how the Indians were categorized. There are federal departments in Canada and they classified the Indians in the department of immigrants. They did not even know where to register us, they should have left us alone. In our life of hunters, in our life of great freedom. (Mestokosho, 2009)

For Mestokosho, using those words even for literary classification is borrowing the words of the colonizers even if the word *autochthonous* is the official name that can be found in the Canadian administration. The writers of the First Nations do not only write, they are also journalists, moviemakers, cultural mediators and singers. Jean-Louis Fontaine (born in 1951), Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui (1976), Geneviève McKenzie-Sioui (1956), Maya Cousineau-Mollen (1960), Virginie Pésémapéo Bordeleau (1951), Georges Sioui (1948), Charles Coocoo (1948), André Dudemaine (1950), Alice Jérôme (1948), Julian Mahikan (1975), Michel Noël (1944), Jean Sioui (1948), Sylvie-Anne Sioui-Trudel (1956), Marie-Andrée Gill (1986), Christine Sioui Wawanoloath (1952) and Joséphine Bacon (1947) represent the development of this literature.

Rita Mestokosho (born in 1966) is a political representative of the community of Ekuanitshit (150 people) in the council of the First Nations and a poet. She works on the cultural development of the First Nations and has been engaged against the extractivist projects from the provincial government in the region of *Côte Nord*. Ekuanitshit means "place surrounded by mountains" (Mestokosho, 2009), the toponymy is important for Rita Mestokosho as these places belong to the First Nations. As a member of a tribal council, she has a seat in different assemblies from the local level to the provincial and federal ones. Her first collection of poems was published in 1995 (Mestokosho, 1995) and was reedited in 2010 and 2011 after the French writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio paid tribute to writers from the First Nations during his reception speech of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008 (Sule and Premat, 2011: 20). Rita Mestokosho explained that she used French to address a political message to a broader audience.

And when I wrote the poems, every word was thought in Innu before being transcribed in French. [...] I conceived them in my Innu soul. I slept on fir mats, I swam with salmon in the rivers, I know that I have all this inside me, you know. And to have the privilege of writing in French and be able to share it, I am all the more happy, because I find that poetry is a secret weapon, even if I do not like the word weapon. Poetry chose me. (Mestokosho, 2009)

Rita Mestokosho considered poetry as an open strategy to awake the readers' emotion and empathy for the First Nations. She wrote in Innu before translating the poems into French and she perceived poetry as a genre that just transcribes experiences and deep emotions. The choice of words is very important and the Innu-Aimun language has an aggregative syntax where the words refer to a series of relations to the nature. Poetry differs from political discourses as people are more receptive and get interested in learning more about the culture and the traditions of the First Nations.

Naomi Fontaine was born in 1987 in the community of Uashat (Online 1), she became writer to understand her own history as she noticed that she did not know her ancestors (Online 2). She had access to the history of the colonizers and she needed to use literature to express the complexity of the Innu identity. According to Naomi Fontaine, literature offers a possibility to give lessons to white colonizers. The white colonizers do not know the Innu way of life, they would be lost in the forest (Online 2). It is one of the last possibilities to resist violence and humiliation. Literature is a way of giving a feeling of pride to the community. The writer Natasha Kanapé Fontaine points out that writing is an act of resistance against extreme forms of racism. 'Racism is built on the silence of those whom we reject and of whom we are afraid' (Ellis Béchar and Kanapé Fontaine, 2018: 13). Naomi Fontaine writes in French with words from Innu-Aimun, she inserts them into her novels to show that the First Nations cannot be reduced to a negative perception that white colonizers have. Naomi Fontaine would like to fight for the dignity of her community and shares the same ideas as Natasha Kanapé Fontaine.

No one actually needs to be punished for this racist culture. We should instead serve the community good food for the spirit. I am constantly telling Québécois and other peoples who descend from colonizers that it is not their fault. The fault lies with those who created this country on a foundation of racism and discrimination, and the government leaders who have perpetuated this system. That's a proven fact. We, the Indigenous Peoples, have known this from the beginning. We had seen it in our oracles and our camp fires at night, long before the arrival of the 'White man' on the continent. (ibid.: 11)

Fontaine and Mestokosho wrote and talked about the genocide of the First Nations. Naomi Fontaine also expressed in many interviews and conferences (Online 2) the necessity of having a decolonial attitude. A decolonial attitude means that the First Nations have to reject the oppressive system and every form of colonialism. Decolonizing takes time and this is why the Innu literature is precious to re-empower the Nations in a long-term perspective. If Rita Mestokosho and Naomi Fontaine belong to different generations, they want to transmit traditions and other ways of thinking in order to denounce the disastrous consequences of colonialism. They do not want to blame the new

generations of white readers, they just want to open their eyes on the reality so that they can contribute to a decolonial gesture. Literature is used as a cultural empowerment for these writers.

## 2. THE POST-GENOCIDE PERSPECTIVE AND THE POETIC FORM

The poems of Rita Mestokosho are not easy to classify as they fall between an elegy for a lost world and the hope for a continuation of ancestral traditions. The poetic form is not perceived here as a ‘mirroring or imitative’ (Hurley and O’Neill, 2012: 7) process where the verses reflect and translate a sociological reality; it is an association of sounds that contribute to a kind of prayer. The religious aspect is maybe the most important one in Mestokosho’s work, as the transmission of values to new generations is expressed in a metaphorical meditation. For instance, the poem *Tshishe Manitu!* illustrates this prayer with the anaphora ‘May my’. ‘May my heart shine brightly with joy / when it hears your name / May my eyes gaze upon / the one truth you are. / May my ears hear only the word of God’ (Mestokosho, 2011: 61). The prayer associates God with the Earth and the human beings living on it, it is a general text addressed to everybody without any pragmatic intention. This poem is characterized by a feeling of absolute presence (De Raeymaeker, 1940: 32). The anaphora is here necessary in order to activate an intensity of emotions where all the senses are evoked (eyes / ears / heart). God is the recollection of all those small perceptions. ‘Form is a poem’s principle of life. It is protean, multiple, ever-changing. It presents itself under many different guises’ (Hurley and O’Neill, 2012: 1). The prayer is all the more striking as God is presented from an outside reality (‘Thus may I spread the word of God’) before becoming an intimate feeling of love. ‘Most important, may I never mislay the greatness of your / love in the suffering of life; instead, may I share it / with all the men and women around me’ (Mestokosho, 2011: 61). The anaphora creates a fluid rhythm with an emphasis on specific syllables.

The poem *Tshishe Manitu!* is built around a gradation so as to invoke the divine presence that produces love. This poem is surprising as the reader is used to the celebration of natural elements in other poems by Rita Mestokosho. Here, the meditation embraces the spiritual energy of life. *Tshishe Manitu!* is a common expression in the Innu language in Northern Québec; it is the title of a fairy tale told to children (Online 3). More recently, Florent Vollant composed a song with this name (Online 4). Rita Mestokosho commented on the expression *Tshishe Manitu* in the following way:

The further I go towards the North, that is to say towards old age, the more I realize that I still have in me this hope that people can change. Maybe that’s what it is, faith in God. I call it *Tshishe Manitu* the Great Spirit, this beautiful light, this sun that illuminates our

lives despite everything. (*Indigenous Women's Turn to Take the Talking Stick*, 2018: 260)

The prayer reveals the idea of rediscovering a human path (*Mistapéo* in Innu-Aimun) where God expresses the harmony of natural elements. The North for Rita Mestokosho is the orientation of the journey where ancestral traditions recall this initial harmony. The North is the dream that animates human beings as they have to rediscover their ancestral voices.

In fact, it shows that Rita Mestokosho is inspired by a long oral tradition that celebrates a spiritual form of unity between divine and natural elements. The idea is to have a comparative poeology to analyze the literature of the First Nations. The comparative poeology is close to ethnopoetics, but it is not a mere transcription of oral traditions, it is a creative process that tries to incorporate the echo of some fundamental sounds for the Innu. Some of the poems of Rita Mestokosho appear in Innu, French, English and Swedish such as the poem *A Poet Wild and Free*. The first verse of the poem in Innu shows recurrent sounds: 'Nitshituteti tshetshi nishtuapataman innium' (Mestokosho, 2011: 45) / 'I set out to battle life and reign supreme' (ibid.: 47). These sounds are very ancient; they belong to the language Innu-Aimun; there are no vowels and these sounds were always transmitted through oral traditions before being transcribed into the written language. In Canada, there was a standardization of the Innu language at the end of 1989 (Mollen, 2006: 23) with an uniformization of the written language. The Innu-Aimun language is characterized by the distinction between inanimate and animate classes of nouns; there are neither feminine nor masculine forms. Innu-Aimun is an aggregative language where the derivation form is used to mark the aspect of the meaning. Moreover, the determiner is included in an aggregative form at the end of the word. The qualification of the type of action is concentrated in the word. The verbs are a prevailing grammatical category and even the colours are expressed by animate or inanimate verbs. As a matter of fact, the translation from Innu-Aimun into English or French is problematic as these variations of perceptions are lost. The choice of a poetic form is also linked to the difficulty of translating a mixture of perceptions that exists in Innu-Aimun meanings. The repetition of the sounds in the poems creates a feeling of diffusing and diffracting possible images of the Innu Being. Jean Baudrillard, in his work on image and simulacrum, also dealt with the choice of words in poetic texts.

In fact, the theme-word is *diffracted* throughout the text. In a way, it is 'analysed' by the verse or the poem, reduced to its simple elements, decomposed like the light spectrum, whose diffracted rays then sweep across the text. (Baudrillard, 2017: 219)

The sense of diffraction characterizes the Innu texts as they progressively enlighten the world. The "theme-words" do not represent fixed entities, but contribute to the transmission of deep feelings associated with elements of the surrounding world. Each page could be read as a separate poem where places, objects and persons have existence. Some of the First Nations writers define

their literature as a form of meditation (Assiniwi, 1989: 46) or a story-telling process (Vizenor, 1984: 7) where the truth of the First Nations can be expressed. Assiniwi wrote a saga to tell how the genocide happened and its consequences on the existence of the First Nations (Assiniwi, 2000: 275).

The publishing houses have a key role as they give a voice to this type of literature. This is the case for the publishing houses *Mémoire d'encrier* for Naomi Fontaine and *Beijbom Books* for Rita Mestokosho. The publishing house *Beijbom Books* was founded by the Swedish journalist, Karl Beijbom who has been active since the 1970s. He received a prize for his engagement in journalism in 1974 (Online 5) and created the publishing house *Beijbom Books AB* in 2009 (Online 6). He is well-known for his originality in journalism; the jury's motivation for his prize in 1974 pointed out that 'he succeeded in transforming *Arbetaren* into a multicultural and non-orthodox forum for a free cultural and political debate at a time of polarization and press death' (Online 7; translation mine). Karl Beijbom published poetry, aphorisms and novels and paid attention to multilingual translations and relations between foreign languages. This is why *Beijbom books* edited a first version of Mestokosho's book in French, Swedish and Innu (Mestokosho, 2010) and later a version of the book in English, French and Innu (Mestokosho, 2011). Moreover, the multilingual version was made for several types of readers, but at the same time it contributes to a form of intercultural reading. The intercultural reading evokes an empathy for other means of expression. In this perspective, this intercultural reading is important in order to have an intercultural understanding and a de-centered view of the diversity of cultures (Lau, 2016: 11). The publishing house *Mémoire d'encrier* of Montréal is specialized in the promotion of cultural diversity with an emphasis on the stream of *littérature autochtone*.

The novel *Kuessipan* by Naomi Fontaine was translated into English; the word *Kuessipan* means 'your turn'. It is a fundamental address to the Innu community in order to imagine the future. The novel was written in French and is composed of a series of short paragraphs reflecting the mental and physical barriers of the reservation. The style of the novel is close to a lament where short phrases reveal the difficulty for an Innu to live as an Innu. The meaningless surrounding of the world enlightens the condition of the young Innu generation. The Innu community is colonized by other categories that destroy their possibility of imagining a future. The reservation is suggested at the beginning of the novel with the fog that represents an unknown place.

Dense fog. The poor visibility makes the drivers slow down. Sometimes they put on their flashers to help each other get oriented. The road is wet. No one takes a chance on passing. In the dark, you see better with the headlights on low. It won't last more than a few minutes, an hour. (Fontaine, 2013: 10)

The metaphors and the metonymies prevail in the text of Naomi Fontaine to circumscribe the space of the reservation. As Sojcher wrote, 'if poetry is



a space that opens up in language, if through it words speak again and meaning becomes significant again, it is because there is between everyday language and rediscovered speech a shift of meaning, metaphor' (Sojcher, 1969: 58). There is a density in the style of Naomi Fontaine where common expressions reveal the shift in perceptions. In addition to this, the short sentences ('the road is wet') anchor the scene. The reservation is perceived as an intermediate space where nobody dares to stay. The time is also uncertain; the duration seems to create a form of suffering ('It won't last more than a few minutes, an hour'). The first picture of the reservation is associated with darkness ('dense fog' / 'the dark'), something which is unknown, obscure. The cars are like modern objects that go through those invisible spaces. The reservation is a form of a small and liminal space (den Toonder, 2017: 133–146) where the borders are not perceived. The drivers would slow down when they penetrate this space. The metaphorical aspect of the paragraph is striking; there is the presentation of the social invisibility of this space (Bhabha, 1994: 52). The book is a denunciation of the way the reservation is created as a negative space. These small phrases introduce a dense rhythm which is much more efficient than a discourse on the situation of the Innu community. The sociological situation of the community is dealt with thanks to this poetic style where the phrases are something between aphorisms and verses.

They blamed the fog. It was the usual mist you get on May evenings. The damp wind off the sea carries grey clouds over the road from Uashat to Mani-utenam. The fog must have been thick, opaque, and impenetrable. It must have been a black night, dark and moonless. The other cars shouldn't have been there. He should have been the only one on the road, finding his way, moving through the humid air'. (Fontaine, 2013: 10)

The use of personal pronouns is significant with a difference between 'they' and 'he'. The road that he takes is not the same road that the drivers take. In other words, there is a distinction of perceptions in this environment; the road is the way that drivers take but it is also a metaphor for spiritual destiny. The meaningless destination is due to the emergence of other categories that prevent the achievement of this spiritual journey. Naomi Fontaine has used all the personal pronouns in French ('*Ils*', '*Il*', '*Je*', '*Tu*') to create a mixture of narratives. In Innu-Aimum, the nouns imply a direct relation from one human being to the other such as the word *Kuei* which would mean 'Hello my deep friend' (Ellis Béchar and Kanapé Fontaine, 2018: 9).

The moral pattern prevails in the indignation ('the other cars shouldn't have been there. He should have been the only one on the road') to point out the different cultural perceptions of the destination.

The feeling of in-between indicates the social invisibility of these communities that are segregated into those Northern reservations. The nominal sentences illustrate the difficulty of seeing the way out. 'Fear, inexperience,

speed, recklessness, taking chances – a way out’ (ibid.). There is a reference here to several perceptions: the fear and the inexperience are associated with the driver, but it also emphasizes the challenges that the community has to face. This is why those short phrases are very powerful as they multiply the possible associations. The narrative is poetic in its way of compressing the sentences to express a very tough reality.

I wish you could meet the girl with the round belly. The one who will raise her children on her own. Who will scream at her man when he cheats on her. Who will cry all alone in the living room, who will change diapers all her life. Who will look for work at thirty, finish high school at thirty-five, who will start living too late, who will die too soon, completely exhausted and unsatisfied. Of course I lied. I threw a white veil over the dirt. (Fontaine, 2013: 11)

The social fatality is here highlighted by the use of anaphora ‘who will’ as if there was a curse. The author explicitly includes the reader in the book and proposes an image of what an Innu woman’s life looks like. The future is like a repetition of the current condition and the lament denounces the negative perception of Innu life. In reality, the decolonial perspective is absolutely essential in this book. The reader can have access to the social misery of the people living in the reservation, but also needs to deconstruct the usual categories of perception when it comes to the presentation of the reservation and the community. Naomi Fontaine gives an access to feelings and emotions that are shared by different generations of Innu. The focus is not on characters but on perceptions. The classical attributes of a novel do not appear, *Kuessipan* has a minimalist aesthetics that reflects a decolonial vision (Bhaba, 1994: 12).

Naomi Fontaine’s poetic style is original as it creates different states of perception depending on the cultural reading that can be made. The Innu are used to being perceived as a specific target in the domain of public policies. As a matter of fact, they are often represented by the words such as alcoholism, violence and single mothers, but the reality is that the community never had the possibility to develop self-perception strategies. Rita Mestokosho named the presence of the technical colonization with the presence of machines in the poem *A People Without Their Land*: ‘His sadness will be vast as the sea / For he’ll have seen the land die under his feet / Devoured first by men and machines / To construct a new city’s streets’ (Mestokosho, 2011: 69). The poem is a tribute to the communities of the First Nations where the land is considered as a Being in itself, the support of the Innu way of life. Here, the accusation of the poem is strong as the colons are denounced in their tendency to erase the past and the future of the Innu community.

‘In a place that lacks support and respect / You’ll stagnate my child, and you already do / Your ambition and thirst for power bring death / But, despite that, my spirit will win through’ (ibid.: 69).

The spirit is the element of survivance that is impossible to dominate; it represents a deep form of liberty. In this context, the essence of colonialism is perceived in power relations. The children can be segregated and dominated, but the spirit is unalienable.

The urbanization of the world is here characterized by a territory dispossession. In this perspective, Naomi Fontaine described the city as an impersonal and rootless space (Fontaine, 2011: 29). The poetic form is necessary in both works to point out a feeling of loneliness between two antithetical paradigms, but there is another possible breath in the dynamics of resilience.

### 3. SURVIVANCE AND RESILIENCE

Not only is the poem an efficient literary genre to break the flow of colonial narratives, it is also a strong mode of resilience for the First Nations. The poetry is efficient as it reminds the reader of their own traditions with specific attention being given to the environment. Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio contributed to the acknowledgement of Rita Mestokosho in his Nobel speech in 2008 (Mestokosho, 2011: 11).

Rita's voice touches our hearts because it is natural and accessible and there is nothing affected about it. She speaks for the creatures which live alongside us in the world and which we must respect, the salmon in the river, the bear in the forest, and the smooth pebbles in the streams. There is muted pain, like the low sound of the wind, the murmur of trickling water. The call of the horizon, the recollection of wide-open spaces one crossed by the nomads as they hunted and gathered wild plants. (Mestokosho, 2011: 11)

The poetry of Rita Mestokosho reconnects the reader to simple and important feelings that include human beings and natural elements into the world. In her poems, there are correspondences between the Innu spirit and other beings that the reader needs to look at. It is as if the Innu had to forget what they have learnt in order to see their own environment. The loyalty to the environment is constitutive of the Innu identity. It is also possible to find quotes that describe the simple way of being in the world in the novel of Naomi Fontaine when she writes about the salmon in the river (Fontaine, 2011: 46). The silence is opposed to the noise of modern life in order to see and hear the other beings such as salmon. Being away from this peculiar way of life is a source of unhappiness and Mestokosho's poem 'Innu' is the first poem that reveals this absolute necessity.

'With the unique smell of the woods / Ingrained so deep it is in your bones / You dwell alone with your thoughts / But from the way you act and live / I sense you miss your way of life' (Mestokosho, 2011: 17).

The relationship between the bones and the thoughts is decisive here, as the rediscovery of simple feelings re-identifies and re-empowers the Innu

way of life. There is a form of moral injunction introduced by a pronoun which is a collective entity ('You' can be a 'We' which is not limited to the Innu community) and a message close to a kind of aphorism (Bell, 1997: 8). An aphorism is a fragment of text that contains a general truth that can be transmitted from one generation to the other. The aphorism is not presented with a distance; it is a personal and intimate injunction with a specific message. Here, the political dimension of the poem prevails.

'Your message is to protect the land / I'll protect it for as long as  
I live with it / But I won't neglect to learn / Your message which is so  
sacred / And share it with the world...' (Mestokosho, 2011: 17).

The poem encourages a specific attitude which is illustrated by the anaphora ('Your message' / 'protect') and the negative injunction ('I won't neglect to learn'). This is exactly what Rita Mestokosho told us in an interview given in 2009.

We have the responsibility to take care of ourselves. And above all,  
to teach each person we meet, the essential message of caring for  
the land, because it is the most beautiful legacy that we will give  
to our children, our grandchildren. (Mestokosho, 2009)

Writing poetry is a political act to preserve the environment. At the same time, the Innu have to remain Innu if they do not want to lose their identity and the link to the land. The resilience is powerful as it shows another way of defining what thinking means. To some extent, the prayers of Rita Mestokosho have moral injunctions for the actions, but describe a very meditative approach close to what the philosopher Heidegger calls the meditative thinking. The idea is not to impose an interpretation from a western philosopher to a specific corpus of literature of the First Nations, it is rather a way of connecting this literature to other philosophical works to show that it expresses in a much better and efficient way what Heidegger theorized. The distance between cultures can activate a perception of linguistic and literary resources that are available in order to translate emotions (Online 8).

If we explicitly and continuously heed the fact that such hidden meaning touches us everywhere in the world of technology, we stand at once within the realm of that which hides itself from us, and hides itself just in approaching us. That which shows itself and at the same time withdraws is the essential trait of what we call the mystery. I call the comportment which enables us to keep open to the meaning hidden in technology, *openness to the mystery*. (Heidegger, 1966: 55)

There is an attitude of finding where the human being accepts the non-calculability of the world. The openness to the mystery is necessary in order to rediscover the complexity of the world and the interrelations between different kinds of being. Nature hides behind some visible natural elements; it is an invitation to refresh the perception of the world. The aim is not to make

an essentialist interpretation of these poems but rather to reveal a meditative attitude where the words refer to the beauty of the surrounding world. Gerald Vizenor uses transcultural boundaries in order to activate the emotions of the readers. He compared the indigenous poetry with haiku in the way the poems catch attitudes and motions (Vizenor, 2014: XI).

The universal message of Mestokosho's poetry is striking here as the survivance is not only the problem of the First Nations; it is a common legacy. This is why her poetry has been used as a universal and moral injunction to avoid the perpetual exploitation of natural resources to satisfy artificial and useless needs. In the case of Naomi Fontaine, it is more problematic as there is the description of an intermediate space, the reservation, which falls between natural landscapes and megacities. It is difficult to retain young Innu on these reservations, but at the same time, they need to be together in order to invent the modalities of resilience. The novel by Naomi Fontaine is characterized by a deep feeling of loneliness marked by the use of ellipsis that creates a rupture of narrative voices. *'Il fait des sourires à l'enfant, lui demande qui est son père. Il répond : Je n'ai pas de père'* [*He smiles at the child, asks who his father is. He answers: I do not have a father.*] (Fontaine, 2011: 17; translation mine). The continuity between the indirect speech and the free indirect speech is interesting, as it points out the absence of the father, which is a recurrent problem in the Innu community. The ellipsis is here marked by the use of colons. Naomi Fontaine never used the dot dot dot in the novel to express ellipsis, which is striking, as the dot dot dot is a classical way of indicating the omission of words (Toner, 2015: 152).

This is also why many women writers address the men so that they take their own responsibilities in reshaping the ancestral links. In this perspective, women writers re-empower the community by regretting the wandering of men. In addition to this, there is an implicit reference to the system of residential schools in Québec with the question of child abuse. The absence of fathers is a recurrent problem for this community which is reinforced by the ellipsis in Naomi Fontaine's text. If there is an absence of fathers; it means that there is a strong difficulty to transmit a cultural legacy. The Innu as a community are forgotten and neglected such as expressed in the following extract where the Catholic cemetery and the Baptist church of the reservation are presented:

The Catholic heart, established since the time of the Jesuits, still beats in the Innu soul; the only religion learned, acquired, almost traditional as the priesthood goes back far in the memories of the nation. The only forgotten memory: the emancipation of the Innu at the age of the first letters. The event: the kidnapping of Indians who never asked to be white. Their scattered children, taken elsewhere during the hard months of the school year to give, they say, a meaning to their intelligence. (Fontaine, 2011: 49; translation mine)

In this excerpt, the ellipsis reveals the historical erasure of the Innu, who disappear after several waves of colonization. As a First Nation, the Innu are

deprived of their past and their future is insecure as the children were taken to residential schools where they had to learn the categories of the colonizers. According to the anthropologist Maurice Godelier, the colonization as a general process is expressed in three different domains, the religion, the education and the administrative and political system (Godelier, 2017: 122). Godelier was working on one of the last communities discovered in New Guinea, the Baruya. Here, the process is similar to the Innu identity being ignored. The style of Naomi Fontaine is ironical when she writes ‘the only forgotten memory’ because the erasure of the Innu memory is the biggest scandal of modern times. The genocide is mentioned by a metonymy that suggests the systematic oblivion (Ellis Béchar and Kanapé Fontaine, 2018: 27).

The reported speech (‘they say’) illustrates a process of othering where the Innu do not have anything to say on their History which is written by the colonizers. The process of othering is defined in discourse analysis as showing the linguistic modalities of the difference between we and they (Van Dijk, 1993). Here, the Innu are perceived as people without a proper identity. If they have an identity, it was provided by the first colonization which resulted in the adoption of Catholicism.

The denunciation of residential schools is all the more important as the young generations were deprived of having access to their own culture. The resilience to cultural erasure is possible if the generations are able to communicate with each other. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada officialised the negative impact of residential schools on the First Nations. In the poems of Mestokosho, the resilience is made possible with a spiritual regeneration of the Innu community. Resilience helps to heal the wounds of the past such as it is noticeable in the poem ‘Guardian of the Earth’. ‘In the bottomless well of my silence / I found again my childhood exuberance / A well in which I’d sunk without trace / In which my life might have been effaced / If I hadn’t rallied and seen sense’ (Mestokosho, 2011: 57). The topic of the erasure is also present but the regeneration implies a form of rebirth, the verses indicate the necessity of connecting to the ‘Great Spirit’ (ibid.) in order to find a new strength.

In *Kuessipan*, the reservation is also a metonymy that echoes the social invisibility of the Innu people. The metonymy shows that the reservation is a word that refers to the way of life of Innu communities. In other words, this is the current location of the Innu community which is not idealized by Naomi Fontaine. The dilemma here is that most of young Innu would like to travel and escape the fatality of this space which is perceived as a colonial confinement.

It is easier to be nobody in big cities. All these people that you meet do not know anything about you. They look at you distractedly while thinking about something else. It has hardly been a few months since you left the reservation, the village that knows you, your family, your friends to move in incognito in the nothingness of this city. (Fontaine, 2011: 29; translation mine)

The anonymity of modern cities breaks both the ancestral links of the Innu and their relation to the reservation. These novels represent a certain decolonial tendency that is prevailing in the literature of the First Nations. In an article published in 1994, the philosopher Étienne Balibar questioned the notion of cultural identity and its place in different debates. He proposed our antinomies where the notion of cultural identity is framed, first the opposition subjective/objective, second the opposition universal / singular, third the opposition elites / mass, and last the opposition between permanent and evolution (Balibar, 1994: 55). The decolonial paradigm would be a way of deconstructing the categories imposed during a colonizing process to rebuild a form of permanent identity. The idea of resilience implies a strategy of re-empowerment that these women writers use to protect this wounded identity. The other difficulty is that the discourse on the recognition of cultural identity tends to be a part of a metanarrative of national identity. If the Canadian authorities are willing to allocate funds to reinforce the transmission of these cultures, these First Nations are still perceived in their otherness. Rita Mestokosho and Naomi Fontaine use the French language to echo the process of resilience.

## CONCLUSION

The literature of the First Nations contributes to the recognition of a cultural identity which has survived after the genocide. Even though these minorities were granted more cultural rights in Canada, this literature is expressed by the choice of the poetic form as the most efficient way to reconnect these communities to their environment and their traditions. The poetry of Rita Mestokosho implicitly denounces the colonization and the destruction of the Innu way of life. Anaphora and metonymy are powerful stylistic figures to question the difference between the Innu world and the colonizers' categories. Naomi Fontaine has a concise style with the use of nominal sentences, ellipsis and metonymies. The chapters are like short paragraphs that mix different levels of narratives. Both writers denounce the traumatism linked to the absence of men and their books illustrate the emergence of new women writers that share these characteristics in this literature. They are representative of the stream of *littérature autochtone* that has emerged since the 1970s (Jeannotte, et al., 2018), and they enlighten a decolonial paradigm with a necessity of encouraging a new intercultural reading to be able to think with other categories. As Kwok-Ying Lau wrote, 'the so-called primitive cultures would also play an important role in the exploration of the life-world' (Lau, 2016: 8). The analysis of the poetic style reveals an efficient strategy in remembering oral traditions. Naomi Fontaine's novel finds an echo in the poetry of Rita Mestokosho as if these genres gave an echo to ancestral sounds and cultural habits. In this perspective, their work highlights a form of ecofeminism (Shiva et al., 2014: 128) where the women of the First Nations protect the ancestral values. In a nutshell, they play a key role as they re-empower these communities in a postgenocide era.

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