Percées
Explorations en arts vivants

Ktahkomiq: Language as a Territory

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Number 9, Spring 2023

Théâtres et performances des Premiers Peuples : protocoles d'engagement

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112855ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1112855ar

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Publisher(s)

Société québécoise d'études théâtrales (SQET)

ISSN

2563-660X (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Burelle, J. (2023). *Ktahkomiq*: Language as a Territory. *Percées*, (9). https://doi.org/10.7202/1112855ar

Article abstract

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Cahier de traductions

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Abstract

This article discusses the performance *Ktahkomiq* ("Territory") created in 2017 by Dave Jenniss and Ivanie Aubin-Malo with the dramaturgical support of Catherine Joncas. I examine the creative process developed by the artists to explore a long-standing conflict dividing their community without minimizing its irreconcilable dimensions. In particular, I attend to the moments of refusal and reconciliation that shape the performance as well as the role that the Wolastoqey language played in creating a shared territory for the artists.

Keywords: Ondinnok; reconciliation; dance; protocols; refusal

http://doi.org/10.7202/1112855ar

Ktahkomiq, with Dave Jenniss and Ivanie Aubin-Malo. Maison culturelle et communautaire de Montréal-Nord, Montréal, 2017.

Photograph by Myriam Baril-Tessier.

In May 2017, actor Dave Jenniss[1] and dancer Ivanie Aubin-Malo, of the People of the Beautiful River, the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk,[2] presented an autobiographical performance titled *Ktahkomiq* ("Territory") as part of the third Printemps autochtone d'Art in Montréal, organized by Ondinnok Productions.[3] Developed in collaboration with Catherine Joncas, one of the co-founders of Ondinnok, *Ktahkomiq* combined dance, theatre, projections, and rich soundscapes that centred on the Wolastoqey language. As a whole, the piece represented the challenging work of creating a meeting space between Jenniss and Aubin-Malo, whose families have been deeply divided by an ongoing communal conflict.

This conflict, the origins of which are hinted at but never fully explained to the audience, is part of what Aubin-Malo refers to as "our own wars" ("nos propres guerres"; conversation of August 23, 2018), by which she means the wars stemming from colonization and which have torn apart Indigenous communities from within. According to the artist, these wars must be addressed first and foremost while prioritizing nation-specific approaches. Ivanie Aubin-Malo echoes the sentiments of Anishinaabe scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who emphasizes that Indigenous resurgence and decolonization must begin by reactivating the unique relational structures of Indigenous communities that have been fragmented by histories of colonialism (2016: 20). I argue that by prioritizing their personal healing and that of their relationships within the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk community, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo shift their focus in *Ktahkomiq* away from the Canadian reconciliation project (which I will revisit below) as well as from addressing a non-Indigenous audience. In doing so, the artists prioritize their own comfort over that of non-Indigenous audience members. This article explores the protocols of engagement (and disengagement) at the heart of *Ktahkomiq*.

If non-Indigenous audiences were invited to the performance, the artists' interaction with them followed a protocol of engagement inspired by what Jill Carter (Anishinaabe and Ashkenazi) calls an "aesthetic of refusal" (2021: 9-10). According to Carter, this "aesthetic of refusal" is defined by a set of material and immaterial practices through which an increasing number of Indigenous artists negotiate with (or outright reject) the institutions, spaces, and types of relationships from which Indigenous peoples have long been excluded and to which they are now invited, provided they do not cause too much disruption. Faced with this (partial) invitation to participate in structures whose sustainability relies on their dispossession, many Indigenous artists adopt strategies of refusal as an act of Indigenous sovereignty (Warrior, 1994; Raheja, 2010), thereby creating spaces in which they might break free from the narrative frameworks and roles to which they are so often confined.

Although *Ktahkomiq* was presented to a non-Indigenous audience, the performance embodies, in my view, such an "aesthetic of refusal." Indeed, by choosing not to reveal all of the details of the conflict between their families, the artists reject the implicit imperative to enlighten the non-Indigenous audience or make their understanding the purpose of the performance. Jenniss and Aubin-Malo prioritize their own well-being and that of their family and community, turning the performance into a laboratory in which their physical and emotional work primarily serves their own healing and reconciliation.

This approach, tinged with refusal, nevertheless maintains a relationship with non-Indigenous and settler audiences, urging them to self-educate before even dreaming of demanding that First Peoples invest their time, energy, and resources in the Canadian reconciliation project. To be sure, this project is one that extracts a tremendous amount of Indigenous labour in the service of a flawed premise. Reconciliation presupposes that there has been, since the beginning of colonization, a lasting period of harmony based on respect and equality, to which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people could return if they made the necessary efforts. But this is not the case. Furthermore, the colonial project in which we still live presupposes the subordination or even the extinction of Indigenous sovereignty. So, who is the reconciliation for? Is it for the dominant colonial society to reconcile with itself without first doing the necessary work of truth (which is a prerequisite for any reconciliation) and then of the restitution that must follow? Or is it for Indigenous communities to reconcile with a colonial project that still places them as subalterns, as obstacles to its full realization? Rejecting Canada's dominant reconciliatory invitation (which is not really an invitation), in order to focus on intramural well-being, then becomes an ethical stance for many Indigenous artists. This politics of refusal aligns with what Métis artist and curator David Garneau calls "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" (2012: 33). Toward the end of the article, I will revisit the introspective work that this refusal might generate for settler communities.

While they reject the dominant colonial project, the form of intramural reconciliation engaged by Jenniss and Aubin-Malo in their performance nonetheless requires the establishment of engagement protocols – this is to say, ethical and respectful ways of reaching toward the other, both in the creation process and in the performance. I am interested, here, in the protocol implemented and staged by the two artists for *Ktahkomiq*, which, as Aubin-Malo clarifies, "goes beyond the performance" ("va au-delà du spectacle"; conversation of August 23, 2018). Indeed, in addition to subtly exploring the narrative of their two families, the performance reenacts on stage (woven throughout the piece) the engagement protocol developed by the two artists. This protocol includes successful and failed overtures of connection and communication, the collision of bodies, avoidance techniques, in short, the labour involved in reaching out toward the other, in being able, finally, to speak honestly. On stage, the artists give space to the discomfort that accompanies the exploration of wounded territories, to refusal, silence, and irreconcilability.

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Still, bypassing a narrative devoid of hope, Dave Jenniss and Ivanie Aubin-Malo – following in the footsteps of the work of Kim Senklip Harvey (Syilx and T'silhqot'in) – do not offer up Indigenous suffering for a predominantly non-Indigenous audience (at the Printemps d'Art). Instead, they present more complex narratives, a performance-ceremony in which courage, vulnerability, anger, and joy serve as catalysts for healing. Indeed, if, in its initial iteration, and despite the unresolved tension between both artists, *Ktahkomiq* ends on a note of openness, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo were able to deepen this sense of openness when they reworked the performance for the summer tour in 2018, in which they performed in their community on the territory of the Wolastoqiyik. This tour, as Joncas explains, was initiated and partly funded by community decision-makers who, after seeing the performance in Montréal, "felt it was important for this show, this space of dreams and beauty, this example of 'minwaashin,' to reach other Indigenous people"[4] (conversation of December 23, 2021). Joncas notes that "minwaashin," which means "that which is both beautiful and good, which heals, restores, and returns to the source"[5] (*idem*), is at the heart of Indigenous art in general, and of *Ktahkomiq* in particular. This second iteration allowed Jenniss and Aubin-Malo to take stock of their journey without papering over the areas that remain unreconciled.

Ktahkomiq celebrates the patient, generous, and respectful work of its creators, which stems from the engagement protocols developed for Ondinnok by Yves Sioui Durand (Huron-Wendat) and Catherine Joncas, and which Dave Jenniss and Ivanie Aubin-Malo put in place with the crucial presence of the latter. As I will explain later, Joncas served as the mediator, dramaturgical advisor, and directorial guide for *Ktahkomiq*.

Creating a space for healing: inviting all one's relations

Big changes were on the horizon at Ondinnok in 2016. After three decades at the helm of the company, Sioui Durand and Joncas were preparing to pass on the torch of artistic direction, and the Printemps d'Art would mark the start of a new generation of creators within the company. In particular, Leticia Vera premiered *El buen vestir – Tlakenti* (2017), created in collaboration with Yves Sioui Durand, and Dave Jenniss presented *Ktahkomiq*, devised in close collaboration with Catherine Joncas.

Ktahkomiq emerged out of Jenniss' desire to "push [his] limits as an actor"[6] (conversation of August 23, 2018) by creating a dance-theatre performance (a new approach for him) centred on the Wolastoq language and identity. It was Joncas who introduced him to Aubin-Malo, a young Wolastoq dancer, whom Jenniss decided to contact "rather naively" ("bien naïvement"; *idem*). In fact, while Jenniss was vaguely aware of the family conflict between his and the dancer's families, "no one had told [him] to avoid the Aubins"[7] (*idem*), he explains. So, he first wrote and then called Aubin-Malo, leaving a message on her voicemail, which was eventually incorporated into the show. This message stirred up many emotions within the Aubin family, for whom the Jenniss family was so saturated with negative associations that the young dancer, while curious and open-minded, initially struggled to imagine collaborating with one of its members. The performance almost didn't happen. Ultimately, it was the language of their ancestors that brought them together. Following the advice of Yves Sioui Durand to connect with an Elder from the Maliseet community, Dave Jenniss had just spent time with Allan Tremblay, an Elder from Tobique, New Brunswick, and a Wolastoqey speaker and teacher. Following this experience, Jenniss hoped to create a place for his ancestral language within a performance. This fulfilled a long-standing desire for Aubin-Malo, who accepted, not without hesitation, Jenniss' offer. "If it hadn't been for the language, I might not have gone along with it"[8] (Aubin-Malo, conversation of August 23, 2018), she emphasizes. Wolastoqey served as a meeting ground for the two artists, a place of openness in which both of them were taking their first steps.

Before this meeting ground took shape, the two artists found themselves face to face in the rehearsal room. For Aubin-Malo, “there was a big wall” (“il y avait un gros mur”; *idem*) between her and Jenniss. Each of them carried family baggage that they wanted to explore and yet not stir up too much. Faced with this challenging dynamic, Joncas, Jenniss, and Aubin-Malo were forced to establish ways of working together. “My role,” Joncas comments, “was not to take sides and to keep the canoe in the current, to prevent it from crashing on the rocks or the paddlers from getting discouraged. I had great confidence in the process and asked them to do the same”[9] (conversation of December 23, 2021). This being said, how do people work together when unspoken issues, elements of a past that is both real and mythologized through decades of tension, take up all the space and hinder communication? In other words, how does one bear the burden of conflicts inherited from one’s parents and from colonial policies, which are now part of one’s identity? Where does one even begin? “Steps had to be taken,” Joncas explains, “even if it wasn’t easy”[10] (*idem*). This is where the approaches developed by Ondinnok and what these open up for the creation process played a crucial role.

Indeed, at Ondinnok, nothing is left outside of the rehearsal room. Unlike other approaches that ask actors to wipe the slate clean of their experiences, essentially becoming a blank canvas for building a character and narrative, at Ondinnok, it is the human being in its entirety (its ancestors, its community, its shadows, and its light) who is explicitly invited to participate in the creation process. Over the years, Joncas and Sioui Durand have developed a creation protocol for activating what I have elsewhere called the “repatriating” (“rapatriant”; Burelle, 2021: 110) body. The repatriating body surrenders to the encounter with the memories it archives. “The body is the primary vessel of memory,” notes Joncas, “ours and that of our ancestors. Heritage resides there”[11] (conversation of December 23, 2021). The development of these creation protocols occurred in part when Joncas and Sioui Durand collaborated with the Atikamekw community of Manawan.[12] Through this collaboration, the pair worked to create a theatre of healing with “people who needed to reclaim their history, their past”[13] (*idem*). According to Aubin-Malo, this protocol allows for a more “instinctive” (“instinctif”; conversation of August 23, 2018) approach. It is based on simple values (not judging, not lying to oneself, not fabricating, not being afraid...), but how demanding embodying these values becomes when it comes to tackling such thorny issues as reconciliation with oneself, one’s family, and one’s community within the broader context of ongoing settler colonialism.

As is often the case at Ondinnok, the initial meetings in the Montréal studio took the form of free explorations around key objects (animal bones, ancestral stones) designed to awaken the artists, to connect them, to resonate with their lineages (whether familial, artistic, cultural, or otherwise). In other words, these explorations allowed them to identify what accompanies them in the creative process, what works alongside them, propels them forward, or holds them back. Joncas views this work as fundamental for activating the repatriating body and for identifying the narrative and purpose of a performance. After these initial tense moments in Montréal, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo continued their exploration in Baie-Saint-Paul, where, as I will explain later on, they worked and lived together near Joncas and Sioui Durand. In this close proximity, the two artists, guided by Joncas, explored which embodied diplomacy they would use to approach a reconciliation “that had to begin with the truth”[14] (*idem*). Aubin-Malo adds, “I wanted answers to my questions”[15] (*idem*).

Jenniss, however, was not always able to provide these answers. As Jocelyn Sioui (Huron-Wendat) attests in his work *Mononk Jules*, the archives of many Indigenous and settler communities are marked by the absence of certain information which has been lost or “obscured” (“occultées”; 2020: 21-22). The truth is complex and sometimes contradictory; it bears witness to both the machinations of a state aiming to end the so-called “Indian problem” and the survival strategies of communities, which sometimes choose not to record everything in official archives. And alongside official records, there is the memory held by individuals, who are “fragile museums” (“musées

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fragiles"; *ibid.*: 17) shaped by all kinds of forces. Creating an Indigenous theatre of healing and reconciliation means grappling with fragmented narratives.

Through exercises and explorations, the two artists then learned to listen to each other, to respond to one another, and to respect each other's journey, even if this often meant creating separately, "each from [their] own side" ("chacun·e de [son] bord"; Aubin-Malo and Jenniss, conversation of August 23, 2018). For Jenniss, this meant accepting the rejection and anger that had been passed down to Aubin-Malo by her family while delving into his own family's past to better understand the narrative he had inherited. For Aubin-Malo, this meant discovering how to authentically present herself in the studio so as to represent her own people, but also to let difficult and sometimes destabilizing emotions and discoveries move through her. She had to listen to Jenniss as an individual rather than as a symbol of the larger narrative that preceded him. In interviews, they speak about the tension, but also about the kindness and the strength of a creative process in which time is given the chance to do its work. Ultimately, this trajectory, these attempts, working with ancestral stones, at moving toward one another ended up forming the first part of the performance, which features a series of tense solos and duos. "We couldn't do otherwise," Joncas explains, "it was impossible to invent anything other than the artists' trajectory"[16] (conversation of December 23, 2021) as a narrative framework.

Ktahkomiq, with Dave Jenniss. Maison culturelle et communautaire de Montréal-Nord, Montréal, 2017.

Photograph by Myriam Baril-Tessier.

At the very beginning of the performance, Jenniss, alone on stage, addresses the audience directly. He is wearing a t-shirt, and the bottom of his pants, dyed by the artist Lorena Trigos, evokes roots rising from the earth and wrapping around his calves. Anchored (or perhaps mired?), he tells us about himself, about his birth near the territory of the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk close to Trois-

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Pistoles, and then about his move to Rivière-du-Loup following his parents' divorce. He also shares his discovery at the age of thirteen of his father's efforts (he didn't see his father, Aubin Jenniss, often) to obtain "Indian status from the government…" Jenniss' monologue reveals his inner conflict between certainty – "we shouldn't be ashamed of who we are"[17] – and doubt about the legitimacy of his father's endeavor. Jenniss concludes his monologue ambiguously – "I'm Maliseet... well, I think"[18] – thereby exposing the fragility of the narrative surrounding his roots, which threatens to crumble under the pressure.[19]

Ktahkomiq, with Ivanie Aubin-Malo. Maison culturelle et communautaire de Montréal-Nord, Montréal, 2017.

Photograph by Myriam Baril-Tessier.

Then, it's Aubin-Malo's turn to step forward. Alone on stage, surrounded by large ancestral stones arranged in a circle, she dances to the rhythm of a sound environment created by Michel DeMars, in which you can hear the voice of Allan Tremblay speaking Wolastoqey Latuwewakon. Rolling on the ground in a quasi-fetal position, Aubin-Malo touches the ancestral stones one by one, her legs embracing them fluidly, her arms bringing the ancestors toward her heart, her belly. Nestling against the stones, the dancer builds a circle – a family – around her, growing tighter and tighter. This sequence revisits one of the explorations proposed by Joncas, and which proved revelatory for Aubin-Malo. She emphasizes that she felt the presence of her grandfather in the studio as she moved with the ancestral stones: "I felt that I needed to stay strong, standing. I wasn't there to collapse"[20] (Aubin-Malo, conversation of August 23, 2018). This revelation served as a driving force for the dancer, even if it did not always make her encounter with her partner easier. For her, it was about representing her ancestor, who, as the show reveals, is one of the significant figures of the Maliseet nation. He is the "great tree" who contributed to the official recognition of the nation by the Québec government in 1989. Like her partner, Aubin-Malo draws strength from her roots, but while Jenniss talks about doubts and brittle fragments, the gestures of the young woman recreate a complete, solid circle.

Ktahkomiq's poster, with Dave Jenniss and Ivanie Aubin-Malo wearing a forest as a ceremonial headdress.

Poster by Laura-Rose Grenier and Anaïs Gachet.

The ringing of a phone call going to voicemail interrupts the dancer. It's the aforementioned invitation from Jenniss, the one that set everything in motion. Backstage, projections appear on two large screens that rise side by side like two solitudes. In the images manipulated by Laura-Rose Grenier, on one side, we see the profile of Dave Jenniss, and on the other, that of Ivanie Aubin-Malo. They both have a boreal forest as their "hair," with its outline standing out against a grey sky. These images are striking; the forest resembles the ceremonial headdress of leaders who led great battles, but it also evokes the deep connections with the territory from which the Wolastoqiyik were dispossessed, those ties that are carried in the mind, in the body, and in the soul. The forest also serves as their backbone, a strength that keeps them standing and propels them forward. Suddenly, the images jump and fragment, and the voice of an ancestral man speaks softly. Just as during the studio exploration process, where the two artists invited the ancestors to accompany them, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo here summon the man as a witness in the sonic space. The scene then takes on a ceremonial dimension where past, present, and future coexist in tension with one another. The two artists invite us to enter this temporal bubble, in which, through their repatriating bodies, narratives that transcend themselves are played out. Here, the past is revisited and what is to come can be glimpsed.

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Ktahkomiq, with Dave Jenniss and Ivanie Aubin-Malo. Maison culturelle et communautaire de Montréal-Nord, Montréal, 2017.

Photograph by Myriam Baril-Tessier.

The next scene makes this tension palpable. It is the first duet between Jenniss and Aubin-Malo. To the sound of deep and dark music, Jenniss enters the stage on all fours, like a predator. He circles around his partner, who is lying on the ground. He seizes the ancestral stones one by one, becoming increasingly bold, undoing the circle assembled by Aubin-Malo. As he takes possession of the stones and brings them to his side of the stage, his movements gain amplitude and confidence. Behind him, the black and white projections pulse. This scene reenacts the dynamic of the conflict between the two families: some are said to have appropriated an identity that does not belong to them, while others are said to have confined themselves to their version of the facts and do not know all the ins and outs. This scene, like the entire performance, does not seek to clarify the situation. Instead, we are called upon to witness the necessary negotiation for their coexistence on stage and what it imposes on the body and the psyche. In this first duet, Jenniss ventures into slippery and complex terrain by taking on the role of the colonizer, the one who arrives, appropriates, and attacks Indigenous material and immaterial resources. And this exploration leaves him vulnerable.

Ktahkomiq, with Dave Jenniss and Ivanie Aubin-Malo. Maison culturelle et communautaire de Montréal-Nord, Montréal, 2017.

Photograph by Myriam Baril-Tessier.

Indeed, at the end of this sequence, the two artists find themselves on opposite sides of the stage. Jenniss, visibly shaken, watches Aubin-Malo. He and she move slowly toward each other, but there is no real openness yet. Aubin-Malo, in a defensive posture, refuses Jenniss' hand and remains unresponsive when he rests his head on her shoulder. Then, an image is projected on the two screens, showing a cross-section of a tree trunk, with circles indicating the age of the tree and revealing the number of human and non-human generations with which it has been in relationship. Jenniss exits the stage, and Aubin-Malo speaks. Like a tree, she introduces herself in relation to past generations: "I was born Maliseet... in Longueuil," she tells us, adding humorously, "you can't have it all in life..."[21] She is part of the Maliseet diaspora, which I will discuss later, and she informs us that she is the first of her grandparents' grandchildren who will never have known her grandfather, the great unifier, who passed away a year before her birth. Her mother, the dancer tells us, saw the birth of her daughter as a sign: "Spitting image of Grandfather."[22] In honour of her daughter's grandfather, who did so much to bring the nation back to its source, she gave Aubin-Malo the name Taqanan, "salmon," or "she who swims against the current," to mark her difference. Jenniss and Aubin-Malo are divided by many differences: she was "born Maliseet," while he became one at thirteen; she knows her origins, he questions his own.

The personal and the political: approaching the conflict

Up to this point in the performance, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo have been evolving in parallel; their respective worlds, their constellations of ancestors, have brushed up against each other without actually meeting. Their first verbal exchange on stage, explosive in nature, is a collision. Aubin-

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Malo yells at him, "Jenniss? Thief, liar! Jenniss? I've been hearing that name since I was little. You think I don't know you? I've had enough of Jenniss! And you, you come to me with your project?"[23] At the same time, she seizes one of the trestles at the back of the stage and places it in front of Jenniss, who suddenly finds himself in the defendant's seat. The two artists then reenact a scene from their families' past and transport us to the Québec Court on November 3, 2005, where Attorney Dumas questions Mr. Aubin Jenniss, Jenniss' father (whose first name is indeed the same as Aubin-Malo's last name). The details of the case are barely outlined, but we understand that Attorney Dumas is casting doubt on Mr. Jenniss' Maliseet identity, to which the latter responds with explanations related to the Indian Act: "I am 054, I have my card. I am recognized in the federal sense of the term."[24] In response, the lawyer asks, "Are you of Maliseet descent?"[25] and inquires whether Mr. Jenniss is offended by being questioned on this matter. Playing the role of Attorney Dumas, Aubin-Malo allows herself to ask these questions without restraint, to confront Jenniss directly. The exchange is tense, defensive, and ends with Jenniss breaking character to address his partner directly:

> DAVE. – I can't play this game! I'm not my father!... It killed him; he fought for three years against a corrupt band chief.
>
> IVANIE. – Well, it killed Jean-Marie Aubin too, my grandfather...
>
> DAVE. – An explosion in his body. He drowned in his own blood.
>
> IVANIE. – My grandmother didn't know what was happening. They rushed to the hospital.
>
> DAVE. – My Maliseet identity is in ruins! My life as an artist, built on my Indigenous identity... We're all just numbers! Where is Maliseet identity in Québec? Nowhere![26]

Here, the artists reenact everything that hung in the air during the creation process, alluding to one of the major scars of colonialism. In addition to territorial dispossession and the creation of Indigenous residential schools aimed at eradicating Indigenous cultures, languages, and family structures, the federal government, through the Indian Act, has appropriated the right to determine who is or is not Indigenous and which nations still exist. The Indian Act continues the logic of exclusion and removal that still aims to eliminate Indigenous status.

These repeated attacks have inflicted deep wounds, dividing communities, as some members of the same family were excluded while others were not, all at a time when non-Indigenous individuals were "becoming" Indigenous. Indeed, it's worth noting that until 1985, an Indigenous woman who married a non-Indigenous person or an Indigenous person from another nation automatically lost her status within her own nation under the Indian Act. Conversely, a non-Indigenous woman who married an Indigenous man became an Indigenous person in the eyes of the law. The effects of this federal policy are still felt today and present significant challenges, both ethically and politically, as well as in terms of material, spiritual, and emotional resources, for many communities.

It is thanks to the tireless efforts of many Indigenous women and their allies that the Indian Act was amended twice (with Bill C-31 in 1985 and Bill C-3 in 2011). However, the Indian Act remains a violent imposition, a form of paternalistic guardianship. The conflict that divides the families of Jenniss and Aubin-Malo stems from the Indian Act and appears to be related to how the patriarch, Jenniss, was recognized as a member of the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk community, which has been declared extinct by the federal government multiple times. In fact, the federal government first expropriated the Maliseet people from the Viger lands in 1870 and then provided them with infertile and waterless lands in 1875. The Maliseet quickly abandoned these lands but continued to assert their rights. In 1891, the federal government sent a very clear message to the Maliseet by granting them the smallest reserve in Canada, which was inadequate and capable of

accommodating only a few families. Therefore, the nation became scattered across Québec, neighboring provinces, and the United States until 1989. People like Jean-Marie Aubin fought to ensure that the nation continues to exist today. In its new incarnation, the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk nation has seen the return of the Maliseet diaspora and, along with it, questions related to belonging and identity.

Language as an “unreconciled Indigenous space”

Inheriting these questions, Jenniss wonders, “Where is Maliseet identity in Québec?”[27] Faced with the heartbreaking realization of the dislocation of Maliseet identity, he turns to language, which he sees as fertile ground. “Language is our last territory: do you want to learn it with me?”[28] he asks Aubin-Malo. This invitation was part of the creation process. During the studio work in Montréal, and later in Baie-Saint-Paul, Jenniss had a Maliseet language dictionary with him, which he had kept from his time with Tremblay. Using it, Joncas asked the two artists to read words in their ancestors’ language aloud, to let themselves be guided by it. While the exercise proved fruitful for Aubin-Malo (she later spent several months with Tremblay to learn the language), it ended for Jenniss with a loud, hoarse cry of anger and distress that can be found in the second part of the performance. “Saying words that were forbidden sets things in motion”[29] (Joncas, conversation of December 23, 2021), observes Joncas.

Onstage, after Jenniss extends the invitation to Aubin-Malo, the two artists assemble makeshift school desks using the two trestles while images of the territory scroll in the background. Sitting at their respective desks, Aubin-Malo and Jenniss are at once themselves, novices trying to wrap their mouths around the sounds of the language, and their ancestors, who suffered because of the language and in their efforts to preserve it. As Aubin-Malo repeats the words she is learning, Jenniss becomes restless. Through him, you can hear the torment of ancestors in the residential schools. Once again, playing both the oppressor and the oppressed, he exclaims, “That’s the language of savages... It’s the language of death, darkness, the devil! What good will it bring to your life to speak it?”[30] Through him, one can sense the pain, but one can also sense what Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa) calls “survivance” (2000 [1998]: 15). Survivance is a portmanteau that combines the words “survival” and “resistance.” It is used to describe the dynamic, persistent, and creative strategies that have allowed Indigenous peoples to confront colonial genocide. Survivance becomes visible in the following sequence: Jenniss fills his jacket with ancestral stones, which he brings under his school desk, turning it into a hiding place. Meanwhile, Aubin-Malo takes her chair and places the stones on it before taking refuge under her own desk, evoking the defensive gestures of many children in the residential schools. Through the artists, one can imagine the unspeakable loneliness experienced by children torn from their families. One can also imagine their survival mechanisms, their courage, and their strength in the face of the unjustifiable violence of the residential schools. The two artists repatriate memories that are not their own, as neither of them attended residential schools. Still, they inscribe their encounter, their work, within a broader historical context marked by “survivance.”

Slowly, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo rise, carrying with the desks, the heavy history of the residential schools on their shoulders. Then, the two artists overturn their trestles to create the illusion of a moose’s antlers. The artists transform before us into two deer whose antlers clash to the sound of percussive music. In this duel, which in nature serves to establish the dominance of one male over another, we also see the meeting of the two artists and their histories, as well as the violent collision of Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds created by settler colonialism. The residential schools represent one of the most shameful chapters in this collision. At the end of this battle with no winner, Aubin-Malo and Jenniss, exhausted, lay down their trestles.

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The next scene, according to Joncas, is a reworking of one of the first dramatic sequences that Jenniss and Aubin-Malo created together during rehearsals. In it, the dancer spreads her jacket over a chair to make it into a bed. Jenniss rolls up his own jacket, transforming it into a doll that he places on the bed. In a calm, almost detached voice, he tells us that it's 1644 and a smallpox epidemic has decimated the population known as the Maliseet. He and she work to recreate a small-scale Maliseet village, using the triangular structure of the books used in the previous language lessons to create makeshift shelters for inhabitants who appear to be ravaged. Within this scenography, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo appear strangely tall and all-powerful in relation to the objects they manipulate. He reads a missionary's letter, which reports numerous villages devastated by the disease, and then proceeds to the clinical reading of an official document from 1744 that offers rewards for the scalps of Maliseet individuals: "One hundred pounds for the scalp of a male over twelve years of age. One hundred and five pounds for a captured Indian male, fifty pounds for the scalp of an Indian female. Fifty-five pounds for that of a living Indian female."[31] By reenacting this scene, Aubin-Malo and Jenniss become part of a broader historical narrative. The identity conflict that divides them is a result of a violent history dating back to the early days of colonization. The document that Jenniss reads, recounting the violent clearing of the territory and its inhabitants, leaves little doubt about the genocidal nature of the colonial project and the complicity of the colonizers, whether French-speaking or English-speaking, in its implementation. Meanwhile, Aubin-Malo gently cradles the doll, which she then covers to perform funeral rites. In the subsequent dance sequence, filled with restraint, the two artists, brought together by grief, finally touch each other before lying down on the ground.

This is a moment of great physical closeness, the first true surrender. Their bodies are intertwined and, after a pause, Jenniss tenderly asks his partner, "Are you okay?"[32] She doesn't respond, which worries Jenniss, who takes hold of the ancestral stones and tries to revive her. He passes the stones over the dancer's body, placing them around her, on her heart, growing more agitated and desperate. How to revive her? And how, through her, to revive a language, a culture, a nation? Then we hear Aubin-Malo's voice, saying, "I'm not dead, I'm just immobile. Help me move."[33] Jenniss panics. He resumes his maneuvers with the stones. He holds the dancer in his arms, cries, and shouts. This passage is taken from a dream that Jenniss had during the creation of the performance. The sequence indeed possesses dreamlike qualities: a certain lethargic blur, movements that seem heavy and slowed down. At its peak, Jenniss' emotional buildup hints at a possible revelation. In fact, Aubin-Malo finally moves, gets up, and performs, on a stage bathed in a marine light, the dance of Taqanan, the salmon that swims upstream to return to its place of origin. Jenniss watches her with the admiration reserved for the living who face herculean obstacles, for salmon that persistently swim against the current to ensure continuity.

Ktahkomiq, with Ivanie Aubin-Malo. Maison culturelle et communautaire de Montréal-Nord, Montréal, 2017.

Photograph by Myriam Baril-Tessier.

http://doi.org/10.7202/1112855ar

Ktahkomiq, with Ivanie Aubin-Malo. Maison culturelle et communautaire de Montréal-Nord, Montréal, 2017.

Photograph by Myriam Baril-Tessier.

As Aubin-Malo-Taqanan continues her courageous ascent, appearing to offer it to Jenniss as a gift, as inspiration, Jenniss declares, "I have a river within me. A great river. The water hits, there's an immense torrent. I see canoes sailing... My body aches... I have a territory within me."[34] He marks this territory in the language of their ancestors, reactivating it within him, as Aubin-Malo-Taqanan dances the journey of the salmon. She is powerful. Her arms vibrate and her legs propel her on a path that goes both forward and backward, returning to the source. The dancer is not pretending to be a salmon; it's not about imitating this animal ally. On the contrary, she moves in communion with Taqanan, she is his human ally, and she makes his tenacity and wisdom visible to us. As a symbol of the "survivance" shared by both artists, Taqanan allows them to make tangible the territory that must be rebuilt, the one to which they must ascend.

This territory takes shape in the final scene of the performance, which is entirely performed in Wolastoqey Latuwewakon, without translation. The two artists exchange words that seem to be part of everyday life. They laugh a bit, rearranging elements of the set. They appear more at ease, and the performance ends with both artists looking in the same direction, toward the audience, toward the outside, toward the future. Nothing is resolved, but a path forward seems to have opened up. "We searched a lot for the ending of *Ktahkomiq*... We agreed that language should be at its heart. I suggested the path of utopia," Joncas reports: "What Dave and Ivanie were playing, where they were, who they were, was situated in a different time. They were in the ideal world after, after *Ktahkomiq*, where language is part of everyday life, a world of peace"[35] (conversation of December 23, 2021).

This latter half of the performance explores what I imperfectly call, drawing inspiration from David Garneau (2012), unreconciled spaces, which prioritize their own healing rather than an external reconciliation with non-Indigenous communities. The artists also allow themselves to delve into an internal conflict without imposing a resolution. Indeed, the performance offers a window into an ongoing process, an individual and collective exploration that has not resulted in a perfect resolution. As Joncas argues, there was no moment when either of the artists finally gave up their narrative, no Hollywood moment of grand cathartic embraces. *Ktahkomiq* is a performance about the relationship. It stages the approaches, the failures, the practice of living with each other in an imperfect context.

Land-based dramaturgy

As I mentioned earlier, while the creative work for *Ktahkomiq* began in the Ondinnok studio in Montréal, Jenniss, Aubin-Malo, and Joncas later moved to Baie-Saint-Paul, where the two dancers, in addition to working together every day, also lived together in Joncas' mother's former house. Eating together, sharing daily life, investing the time needed to become acquainted, to enter into a relationship; this is another approach specific to Ondinnok (and other Indigenous companies and artists). As Cree researcher Shawn Wilson (2008) reminds us, engaging in research (whether scientific, artistic, or otherwise) means establishing a privileged relationship with one or more bodies of knowledge and experiences in order to better understand them. However, as Wilson suggests, for many Indigenous peoples, this knowledge, which is a living entity, is relational. This means that knowledge cannot be extracted from the relationships (with oneself, with others, with human and non-human beings, with the land, with language, etc.) that form its foundation.

Charlevoix has historically welcomed members of the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk nation, whose territory is on the other side of the river, and who came to work as hunting and fishing guides. Therefore, it made sense to transport the creative process there. For Joncas:

> [T]he territory played a significant role in bringing Dave and Ivanie closer together. We were on the edge of the river, and from there, they could see from afar the outline of the mountains, their territory, the Maliseet territory facing them. A great sense of strength overcame them as they physically became aware of the dangers faced by the Maliseet and of their courage[36]
>
> (*idem*).

Between studio sessions, the three artists immersed themselves in the territory: they walked, listening to the sounds of this living archive (the animals, the sound of the water, etc.) and cultivated the relationships that emerged from it.

Jenniss recalls that this living archive quickly extended to everyday objects in the house he shared with Aubin-Malo. The dancer began putting Post-it notes on each object, giving back to it its name in the Wolastoqey language. The two artists thus surrounded themselves with the language in which they were newcomers, allowing it to appear in their daily lives and to flow through their bodies. For Aubin-Malo, this encounter with the language of her ancestors was accompanied by revelations that are reflected in the performance. As she learned, the artist, whose name Taqanan connects her to the marine world, detected aquatic sounds in the language. The language reminded her of the sound of bubbles underwater and evoked in her a sensation of soothing rolling that guided her movements and gestures, especially in the salmon dance at the end of the performance. This impression was confirmed when, later on, Elder Imelda Perley shared with the young dancer

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that the intonations of their ancestors' language were indeed "like waves, mirroring the territory of the people of the beautiful river"[37] (Aubin-Malo, conversation of August 23, 2018). By trusting her repatriating body, Aubin-Malo thus entered into a relationship with the language of her ancestors, first through the sounds, and then through their meaning, when she decided to continue learning the language with Allan Tremblay.

For Algonquin dramaturgical advisor Lindsay Lachance, these discoveries about language and its intimate relationship with the territory, as well as their inclusion in the performance, are representative of "land-based dramaturgies" (2021: 54). Land-based dramaturgies include creative approaches that "may involve physical interaction with land and waters, they may be invoked philosophically in developing the process's framework" (*idem*). Lachance also adds that creators can turn to oral tradition, creation stories, and language structure as possible resources for creating a dramaturgy of the territory. She defines territorially informed dramaturgy as a theatrical creation process in which individuals or communities explore, and in which cultural materials, objects, knowledge passed down within families and places become collaborators in the creation process.

This creative approach, which prioritizes relationships and the time needed to explore them, is one of the important characteristics of Ondinnok's work. By prioritizing this research, the company has articulated, for over thirty-five years, an "aesthetic of refusal" whose ultimate goal is the healing of Indigenous communities, the repatriation of their imaginaries, and the valorization of their specific epistemologies.

Indigenous-Settler reconciliation protocols?

In interviews, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo reflect on one of the important aspects of their creative process, which is the responsibility of each of the stakeholders within a relationship. Joncas, on her part, notes that the young dancer was Jenniss' guest in this artistic process, and as a host, he had the duty to be welcoming and respectful, even if it was sometimes destabilizing and challenging. This is part of the responsibilities of the host in many cultures, including those of several First Nations. Even though it was sometimes difficult, Jenniss, whose childhood away from his father gave him a certain distance from the family conflict, explains that he couldn't rush his partner, tell her to "let her guard down" ("laisser tomber l'armure"; conversation of August 23, 2018) or let go. For a real meeting to take place, Jenniss had to be willing to accept everything Aubin-Malo brought with her. On her part, Aubin-Malo appreciated Jenniss' patience – his ability to recognize that she had "reached that point" ("rendue là"; *idem*) and not to force a closeness that wasn't yet ripe – as she continued to work on her own to uncover the truth. This relational approach, based on respect for the other and the recognition of each person's responsibility, presents a model that, in my view, merits special attention.

Without equating Jenniss' role as a host to that of Indigenous nations, who have involuntarily "hosted" non-Indigenous (non-)guests since the beginning of colonization, what can we learn from this relational protocol as non-Indigenous audience members? In our context, the dominant society, despite being uninvited guests, has assumed the role of host on Indigenous territory, dictating the norms of what Mark Rifkin calls "settler common sense" (2014: xvi), which refers to the set of material and symbolic practices through which settler colonies continue to erase Indigenous sovereignty, presenting the colonial project as legitimate and normal rather than as the continuation of a structure dependent on Indigenous dispossession. As a community that has self-declared itself as a host, we must face the sad realization that we have failed in our basic duties: hospitality, listening, sharing, patience, respect, honesty, and taking personal and collective responsibility. On the contrary, we have dictated the terms of an invitation that we had no right to

extend, and when our “Indigenous guests” expressed their displeasure with this non-consensual relationship, we responded with violence, indifference, or quickly turned their legitimate grievances into attacks on our own sense of moral righteousness. We are neither hosts nor commensals. In fact, we are (non-)guests who have overstayed our welcome, living off Indigenous resources.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, many Indigenous artists seek to make visible and critique this relationship on stage not by explaining it to us, but rather by staging a set of practices marked by the refusal of this division of roles. In the case of *Ktahkomiq*, the two artists turn away from the relationship with the non-Indigenous “other” to focus on intramural healing by advocating approaches based on Indigenous knowledge. In doing so, Jenniss and Aubin-Malo, generous hosts, still present their guests (the audience) with pathways toward what Carter calls a “relational shift” (2019: 186). Indeed, by staging the challenging but necessary negotiation for the co-presence of the artists on stage, by accepting that they won’t resolve everything, that they won’t smooth over what remains unreconciled, *Ktahkomiq*, in my view, contributes to this relational turn.

For this turn to have long-term effects, however, the non-Indigenous audience must critically examine its participation in “settler common sense” and, by extension, in the history of colonialism, both past and present. Joncas is not Indigenous, but she has been working since the beginning of her career as an artist on creating challenging shows “for [Ondinnok’s artists] and for the audience,” aiming to reshape “the great serpent of the Americas”[38] (conversation of December 23, 2021). She speaks of the necessity for non-Indigenous people to engage in this work “without an escape route,” with the courage to participate in this decolonization project while understanding that their role is different from that of Indigenous people but still crucial: “There is another world that wants to be born. We must listen”[39] (*idem*). For Joncas, *Ktahkomiq* measures the extent of this encounter. Jenniss had to confront what he inherited, the zones of shadow and light. Aubin-Malo began to untie knots that were passed down to her. They both wondered how to move forward with the legacy of the Indian Act. The two artists did not shy away from the magnitude of this work. Joncas, like Carter and Simpson, urges non-Indigenous people to do the same, meaning to do their duty, ensuring that they do not repeat the extractive logic of settler colonialism in their relationship with Indigenous knowledge, art, and liberation projects. No more “white saviors.” Simpson instead talks about constellations of co-resistance in which decolonization is work that happens on multiple fronts, in conversation with each other, and in respect of the practices and knowledge of Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized communities (2016: 27-28).

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While it may not be its primary purpose, *Ktahkomiq* adeptly stages the elements necessary for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples for which many Indigenous artists, activists, and intellectuals have advocated for a long time: respect and patience despite the bewildering nature of the work; diligent and committed presence; personal research to educate oneself and reconcile with one’s own history; a refusal to tell the other to “move on” or that it is time to move on to something else. On stage, *Ktahkomiq* provides an example of a possible engagement protocol to begin the necessary groundwork for establishing new relational foundations with Indigenous peoples. It certainly invites the audience to revisit their expectations, confront what they do not know, and cultivate a certain tolerance for discomfort.

How do we create together when our respective histories oppose us? When one’s arrival has contributed to the other’s wound? What actions must be taken if we hope to break the impasse? What are the conditions, the necessary engagement protocols for a meeting to be beneficial for

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both parties, especially if the encounter takes place in a context in which power relations and access to representation are asymmetrical? These are questions that we, artists, researchers, spectators from the dominant and settler community must ask ourselves without hesitation, questions that *Ktahkomiq* addressed gracefully in 2017. Joncas and Jenniss emphasize the importance of this performance in their respective journeys, and Aubin-Malo highlights that it is "an important piece that continues to inhabit [her]"[40] (conversation of August 23, 2018). The same holds true for me, many years later.

Biographic Note

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Notes

[1] Dave Jenniss has since become the artistic director of Ondinnok, succeeding Yves Sioui Durand (Huron-Wendat) and Catherine Joncas, who now serve as artistic mentors.

[2] Formerly known as the Maliseet Nation of Viger, the community has reclaimed its original name. It is now referred to as Wolastoqewi ("the individual") or Wolastoqiyik ("the people").

[3] I attended the first iteration of *Ktahkomiq*, presented in Montréal in 2017, and Ondinnok generously provided me access to its recording. Quotes from the play are from this recording. The second touring version of the show was not recorded, and since I did not see it, I will only briefly mention it. I also had lengthy discussions with Jenniss and Aubin-Malo in the summer of 2018 and with Joncas in 2021. I thank them for their patience and the generosity of the insights shared during these conversations.

[4] "[…] trouvaient important que ce spectacle, cet espace de rêve et de beauté, cet exemple de 'minwaashin', rejoigne d'autres autochtones."

[5] "[…] ce qui est à la fois beau et bien, qui fait du bien… qui restaure et revient aux origines."

[6] "[…] repousser [s]es limites en tant que comédien."

[7] "[…] personne ne [lui] avait dit d'éviter les Aubin."

[8] "S'il n'y avait pas eu la langue, je n'y serais peut-être pas allée."

[9] "Mon rôle était de ne pas prendre position et de garder le canot dans le courant, d'empêcher qu'il se fracasse sur les rochers ou que simplement les pagayeureuses se découragent. J'avais une extrême confiance dans le processus et je leur demandais de faire de même."

[10] “Il fallait faire des pas, même si ça n’allait pas de soi.”

[11] “Le corps est le premier contenant de la mémoire, la nôtre et celle de nos ancêtres. L’héritage se pose là.”

[12] *Opitowap* (1995), *Sakipitcikan* (1996), and *Mantokasowin (*1997) form the cycle of healing theatre that Ondinnok conducted with the Atikamekw community of Manawan.

[13] “[…] des gens qui avaient besoin de retrouver leur histoire, leur passé.”

[14] “[…] qui devait d’abord passer par la vérité.”

[15] “Je voulais des réponses à mes questions.”

[16] “On ne pouvait pas faire autrement, c’était impossible d’inventer autre chose que leur trajectoire.”

[17] “[…] son statut d’Indien auprès du gouvernement…”; “[…] on n’a pas à avoir honte de qui on est.”

[18] “Je suis Malécite… ben, j’pense.”

[19] Jenniss explored the complexity of identity as an actor in Sioui Durand’s *Hamlet le Malécite* in 2004, and as a playwright with *Wulustek* (2011), his first play written during a residency with Ondinnok in 2007-2008. He also revisited this theme in *Nmihtaqs Sqotewamqol / La cendre de ses os* (2019-2022).

[20] “J’ai senti qu’il fallait que je reste forte, debout. J’étais pas là pour m’effondrer.”

[21] “Je suis née Malécite… à Longueuil”; “[…] on peut pas tout avoir dans la vie…”

[22] “Grand-père tout craché.”

[23] “Jenniss? Voleur, menteur! Jenniss? J’entends ce nom-là depuis que je suis petite. Tu penses que je te connais pas? J’en ai jusque-là des Jenniss! Pis toi, tu viens me voir avec ton projet?”

[24] “Je suis 054, j’ai ma carte. Je suis reconnu au sens fédéral du terme.”

[25] “Êtes-vous Malécite de souche?”

[26] “DAVE. – Je peux pas jouer à ça! Je suis pas mon père!… Ça l’a tué, il s’est battu pendant trois ans face à un chef de bande corrompu. / IVANIE. – Ben ça l’a tué aussi, Jean-Marie Aubin, mon grand-père… / DAVE. – Une explosion dans son corps. Il s’est noyé dans son sang. / IVANIE. – Ma grand-mère savait pas ce qui se passait. Ils sont partis vite pour l’hôpital. / DAVE. – Mon identité Malécite est *scrap*! Ma vie d’artiste, que j’ai bâtie sur mon identité autochtone… On est tous des numéros! Elle est où l’identité malécite au Québec? Nulle part.”

[27] “Elle est où l’identité malécite au Québec?”

[28] “La langue, c’est notre dernier territoire : veux-tu l’apprendre avec moi?”

[29] “Dire des mots qui ont été interdits, ça met des choses en branle.”

[30] “C’est la langue des sauvages, ça… C’est la langue de la mort, de la noirceur, du diable! Ça va te servir à quoi de parler ça dans ta vie?”

http://doi.org/10.7202/1112855ar

[31] "Cent livres pour le scalp d'un mâle de plus de douze ans. Cent-cinq livres pour un Indien capturé vivant, cinquante livres pour le scalp d'une Indienne. Cinquante-cinq livres pour celui d'une Indienne vivante."

[32] "T'es-tu bien?"

[33] "Je suis pas morte, je suis juste immobile. Aide-moi à bouger."

[34] "J'ai une rivière en moi. Une grande rivière. L'eau frappe, il y a un immense torrent. Je vois des canots naviguer… Mon corps a mal… J'ai un territoire en moi."

[35] "Nous avons beaucoup cherché pour la fin de *Ktahkomiq*… Nous étions d'accord pour que la langue en soit le coeur. Je leur ai suggéré la piste de l'utopie"; "Ce que Dave et Ivanie jouaient, où iels étaient, qui iels étaient, se situait ailleurs dans le temps. Iels étaient dans le monde idéal d'après, d'après *Ktahkomiq*, où la langue fait partie de la vie de tous les jours, un monde de paix."

[36] "[…] le territoire a joué un grand rôle dans le rapprochement de Dave et Ivanie. Nous étions au bord du fleuve et de là, iels pouvaient voir de loin la ligne des montagnes, leur territoire, le territoire malécite qui leur faisait face. Un grand sentiment de force les a envahi·es en prenant conscience physiquement des dangers surmontés par les Malécites et de leur courage."

[37] "[…] comme des vagues, à l'image du territoire du peuple de la belle rivière."

[38] "[…] pour [les artistes d'Ondinnok] et pour les spectateurices"; "[…] du grand serpent des Amérique."

[39] "[…] sans voie d'évasion"; "Il y a un autre monde qui veut naître. Il faut être à l'écoute."

[40] "[…] un spectacle important qui continue de [l]'habiter."

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