

## ***Notcimik, “Là d’où vient notre sang”*: An Excerpt From an Atikamekw Theatre Production**

Véronique Basile Hébert

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# *Notcimik, "Là d'où vient notre sang": An Excerpt From an Atikamekw Theatre Production*

**Véronique BASILE HÉBERT**

Atikamekw Nation

Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

Université du Québec à Montréal

**Keywords:** theatre; land; Atikamekw; History; story



*Notcimik, "Là d'où vient notre sang,"* with Geneviève Antonius-Boileau and Emilio Wawatie. Festival international Présence autochtone, Place des Festivals, Montréal, 2021.

In the summer of 2021, I presented a hybrid piece of theatre that combined documentary theatre with a creative practice focused on the Atikamekw ancestral territory, Nitaskinan, as well as the current sociohistorical and political context, all from a feminine and feminist perspective. Four actors (three Atikamekw women and one Wendat artist) were present on stage, along with five videographers (four Atikamekw and one Anishnabeg). They were accompanied by the soundscapes of an Anishnabeg musician and a Québécoise musician. Traditional drummers also embodied the heartbeat of the ancestral territory. The excerpt that follows is from the final act of the play. The play was presented at the Festival international Présence autochtone in Montréal with the desire, following the death of Joyce Echaquan, to render visible the presence of Atikamekw and Indigenous peoples to a diverse audience (including allochthonous, Indigenous) in Montréal. The Indigenous artists seized this opportunity to come together to celebrate the resilience of the Atikamekw people and the cultures of the First Nations, especially in the wake of the discovery of the bodies of Indigenous children at former Indian residential school sites. With this artistic and social engagement, they wanted to pay tribute to their Elders, women, men, children, ancestors, and their missing, by carrying their words, their names, and the dreams of their nations. Theatre is a place of encounters and storytelling, and the elders used performance protocols during their political and diplomatic meetings, including through the use of prayers, sacred fire, pipes, and the customary marks of respect of the time. The first two acts of the play are titled "Oka" and "La rivière Serpent."



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Here is the third act:

## Act 3: La Grande Paix de Montréal

*(The four readers will divide the text among themselves and take turns reading)*

### Narrator

North, South, East, West. The four directions have merged at a single point, reaching toward the zenith, much like the walls of a pyramid converge at its peak, pointing toward the heavens, the sun, the moon, and the stars. First Peoples are like the pyramid, with Yellow, Black, Red, and White coming together at its base, uniting their destinies to fulfill the prophecy that will unite the Americas and all its nations. It is the meeting of the eagle and the condor, an ancestral prophecy that one day all the First Peoples of the Americas will come together to grow and rise together in peace and mutual respect. The mountain in my village is ready to fulfill this task, and its fire is now a beacon in the night. All First Peoples are called to come together as it was once the case at Hochelaga, in the past.

*(Projections of historical illustrations of the Great Peace of Montréal)*

### Narrator

In 1701, 1,300 chiefs and delegates from 39 Indigenous nations traveled to the St. Lawrence River to sign the Great Peace of Montréal with the Europeans, ending decades of war.

*(The four narrators take turns reading the names of nations)*

### Narrator

Were present:

**Narrator**

The Hurons of the Great Lakes (Wyandots: Wendats)...

**Narrator**

... represented by the Huron chief Kondiaronk from the nation of the Tobacco People, and a significant figure in the Great Peace of Montréal, to whom we owe the words:

**Narrator**

“The sun has now dispelled the clouds to reveal this beautiful Tree of Peace, which was already planted on the tallest mountain on Earth.”

**Narrator**

Chief Kondiaronk died on August 2, 1701, during the discussions and agreements among the various nations. He was one of the key figures that contributed to the ratification of the Great Peace of Montréal.

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**Narrator**

Were present:

The Sable Odawas represented by Kinonge

The Kiskakons

The Sinago Odawas

The Nassawaketons

The Ojibwe of the strait of Lake Huron and Lake Superior

The Pouteouatamis Potowatomis

The Sauks

The Sioux Otchagras of the west of Lake Michigan

The Menominees or Wild Rice People

The Foxes or Outagamis

The Mascoutens

The Miamis of St. Joseph River

The Miamis Ouiatenons

The Amikwa or Beavers of the north shore of Lake Huron

The Mississaugas from the north of Lake Huron

The Timiskamings

The Nipissings

The Algonquins

The Cree of the northwest of Lake Superior

The “People of the Earth” from the north shore of Lake Superior

The Illinois Kaskakias who died or disappeared on the way

The Illinois Peorias

The Illinois Tapouaroas

The Illinois Maroas

The Illinois Coiracoentantanons

The Illinois Moingwena of the Des Moines River

The Wabanaki Confederacy, representing the Penobscot, the Peskotomuhkati, the Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet), the Mi'kmaq

The Iroquois of the Confederacy of the Five Nations:

The Mohawk,

The Oneida,

The Onondaga,

The Cayugas,

and the Senecas.

### **Narrator**

They lit large fires, beat the drums, and danced. Before speaking, they smoked the peace pipe and, according to the diplomatic tradition recorded by historians (including Gilles Havard, author of the book *La Grande Paix de Montréal de 1701*), they offered three wampum belts:

**Narrator**

"The first one for 'wiping away tears' and mourning the dead.

**Narrator**

The second one for 'clearing the throat,' speaking with sincerity, and for 'unclogging the ears,' to open up to the words of the Other.

**Narrator**

The third one for wiping the 'bloodstained mat' of the longhouses of the council clans, mourning the losses of life in war."

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**Narrator**

In the past, the Atikamekw Nehirowisewok were devastated by wars and epidemics. They survived. In 2001, to celebrate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Peace of Montréal, a delegation from the Atikamekw community of Manawan also came to Montréal. They arrived at the Port of Montréal in a large birchbark canoe. According to what they told me, they had invited themselves to the event.

*(Archival photos are projected)*

**Narrator**

For in 1701, a peace agreement had been signed. The Atikamekw Nehirowisowok still await and hope for that Peace, always and forever.

**Narrator**



The Indigenous peoples of Canada were sent to residential schools to be forcibly “educated.” They endured various forms of abuse, and many never made it back home.

#### **Narrator**

In 2021, the bodies of hundreds of Indigenous children were found in mass or unmarked graves, without proper identification. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada on Indigenous residential schools had already acknowledged the disappearance of thousands of children in these schools.

*(Archival images are projected)*

#### **Narrator**

In September 2020, an Atikamekw woman passed away in a hospital as healthcare staff hurled racist insults at her. Her name was Joyce Echaquan. Sometime before her death, a psychic had predicted that Joyce’s name would be known all over the world. Joyce asked if it was because she was going to become a singer... Now, there is the Joyce’s Principle, which “aims to ensure that all Indigenous peoples have equal access to all social and health services, without discrimination, as well as the right to enjoy the best possible state of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.” (*Projection of Joyce’s Principle and images of marches and demonstrations*) But it’s not only Indigenous women who suffer in Québec.

#### **Narrator**

In 2021, we are witnessing a wave of femicides. Women being murdered by their partner or someone close to them simply because they are women. On this August evening, the count is fourteen femicides in the province of Québec. Does that ring a bell, guys? Fourteen women from the École Polytechnique were murdered in 1989. Fourteen femicides in Québec in 2021. Fourteen women like Fourteen moons. I had just gotten my first period. Yes, I felt something, Chief. History tends to repeat itself...

#### **Narrator**

After years of reluctance, Canada has finally ratified the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. “Adopted in 2007 by the United Nations General Assembly, consisting of 143 signatory countries at the time, the Declaration comprises 46 articles that affirm the rights of Indigenous peoples to language, culture, self-determination, and traditional lands. The Declaration provides a framework for the countries that have adopted it to establish minimum standards for the survival and well-being of Indigenous peoples.”

#### **Narrator**

On September 8, 2014, the Atikamekw Nehirowisew presented their Declaration of Sovereignty. Here are some excerpts:

“We, the Atikamekw Nehirowisew, are a distinct nation... We maintain our sovereignty over Nitaskinan, the ancestral territory passed down by our ancestors from time immemorial. Nitaskinan is our most sacred heritage and legacy. Our Creator intended for us to live in harmony with Nikawinan Aski, our Mother Earth, by granting us the right to inhabit it and the duty to protect it. Nitaskinan has shaped our way of life and our language; it sets us apart from other nations... The transmission of our culture, values, and fundamental knowledge has continued through our oral traditions since time immemorial. These are treasures we aim to pass on to future generations... Atikamekw Nehirowisew has maintained harmonious relations with neighboring nations. Protecting Nitaskinan, defending its way of life, and its aspirations will always guide the



actions of Atikamekw Nehirowisew. We are not Canadians, we are not Québécois-es; we are Atikamekw Nehirowisew, and we belong to Nitaskinan...”

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### **Narrator**

César Newashish is the name of a renowned birchbark canoe builder from the Atikamekw reservation of Manawan. He used ancestral methods for the construction of his canoes, which earned him international recognition. He passed down several significant stories to us. Here are some of his words:

### **Narrator**

“The Nehirowisiw (the Indian) used to hunt a lot from September to November... In September, he hunted the bear (*masko*) to prepare the meat (*wias*). Even before the arrival of guns, the tools were already different from what they used in those times. For instance, the axe (*ositaskw*), there was the one sold by the Iroquois (*Natawew*)...

I told the story of the hunters, their hunting methods, their tools, and their food. No bread (*pakwacikan*), no salt (*ciwotakan*), no tea (*nibicwapo*), it is said they only drank broth. They prepared their food by boiling it in *asini askikw* (pottery). They did a lot of things; it would take a long time to tell it all. It wasn't just hunting; there was their intelligence, the making of arrowheads they found near the ocean shores. That's where they went to get them, maybe by plane,” César said with a laugh. “It's said that the elders had the power to fly above the trees. They were able to develop this skill (or power) that the elders had in order to travel in this way. For hunting, it was like this, too, according to their will or as they pleased. Even when hunting ducks or loons, the elders shot their arrows into the air and could hit their targets, even if their targets were at the bottom of the lake. They were able to have all these skills; even the children could have this power. This was before the arrival of the *Ka Kiskinohomaketc* (missionaries). The elders didn't know the priests and the Whites; they had never seen them before. On the topic of Wemotaci, during the

time of the trade of the Hudson's Bay Company, which had its store in Wemotaci, before the construction of the railway network, on the site near the steep mountain, near the bridge over the Manawan River in Wemotaci, that's where we stayed. It's said that *Kitci atawe iriniw* (literally: main seller), the Hudson's Bay Company, set up a kind of observatory (*wemawpikamikoriw*) on the steep mountain. In the spring (*miroskamin*), after the hunt, the Company would settle on the mountain and could see from all directions the eventual arrival of the Nehirowisiwok, whether from the downstream side of the Tapiskwan River (Saint-Maurice) near Wemotaci, or from the other side upstream or through the Ruban River from Casey, or from the Manawan River. They had a good view of the arrival of the hunters. And the term *Wemawpikamikw* gave rise to the word *Wemotaci*, 'the place where there are things of ours, tools of the elders'"

*(Excerpts from an interview with César Newashish (1902-1994) conducted in Manawan on June 2, 1981, by Albert Dubé, Recherches amérindiennes au Québec, xliv, n° 1, 2014.)*

#### **Narrator**

On April 7, 1994, from his hospital bed, César Newashish, then 91 years old and the elder of the Atikamekw, made one of his most important statements to the federal and provincial governments during the territorial negotiation:

#### **Narrator**

*Witamowikok aka wiskat eki otci pakitinamokw Kitaskino,*

*nama wiskat ki otci atawanano,*

*nama wiskat ki otci meckotonenano,*

*nama kaie wiskat ki otci pitoc irakonenano Kitaskino.*

#### **Narrator**

Tell them we never ceded this territory,

that we never sold it,

that we never traded it,

just as we have never made any other ruling concerning our territory.

Gilles Ottawa, then a member of the newly formed Atikamekw negotiation team, had just informed him that territorial negotiations had resumed with both governments. Previously, César Newashish had contributed to an "Ancestral Rights" case that an Atikamekw hunter from Manawan was to present before a provincial court. His son-in-law, Sylvio Petiquay, witnessed this statement.

*(Excerpt from the Manawan Band Council website: [www.manawan.org](http://www.manawan.org) (<http://www.manawan.org>) )*

#### **Epilogue**

#### **Narrator**

We are gathered here to celebrate our resilience. *(Perhaps a few closing words to add)* Seven stones represent the seven great teachings of the First Nations: Humility, Honesty, Respect, Courage, Wisdom, Truth, Love... We call these stones *Mocom* (Grandfathers). Tonight, they are our guests of honour to celebrate the hope of a new day. As the sound of the drums resonates in the heart of the territory, "Là d'où vient notre sang."

#### **The End**



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Artists:

Véronique Basile Hébert, Jasmyne Basile Hébert, Karine Awashish, and Karl Picard Sioui

Traditional drums:

Northern Voice of Opitciwan's Atikamekw community

Vjing:

Kayan Awashish, Johnny Boivin, Brian Cocoo, Alex Hébert and Craig Commanda, under Michel Poulin's direction

Electric guitar:

Emilio Wawatie

Sound:

Geneviève Antonius-Boileau

"Comprendre Notcimik" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyAEiAB42cg&ab\\_channel=Communautique](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyAEiAB42cg&ab_channel=Communautique))

## Biographic Note

Indigenous theatre artist from the Wemotaci community, researcher, and professor, Véronique Basile Hébert works within Indigenous communities and has collaborated with various theatre companies, including the Festival international Présence Autochtone in Montréal. Drawing

inspiration from Nature and her culture, her theatre is committed to addressing the concerns of Indigenous peoples, women, mothers, and artists.