Decolonial Interruptions of Settler Time in Tanya Tagaq's Art

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Abstract

This article discusses two texts by the Inuit musician and writer Tanya Tagaq to demonstrate the need for honoring Inuit relationships with other-than-human beings through decolonial interruptions of settler time in Canada: a well-publicized photograph Tagaq posted on Twitter in March 2014 of her infant daughter beside a freshly killed seal, and the genre-crossing book *Split Tooth*. Using Walter Mignolo's approach to decolonial gestures, I explore the #sealfie photograph and the novel as textured evocations of the Inuit worldview that was rendered invisible in much of the commentary on Twitter about the #sealfie picture. Both the #sealfie controversy and the book have larger ramifications for how the difficult process of reconciliation between Inuit communities and Canadian settlers is understood. Tagaq's development of form, word, and image allow for reader responses within what Mary Louise Pratt calls cultural "contact zones" (1991) where small shifts in awareness of the continuity and dignity of continued Inuit presence on the land, despite colonization, are possible. In the first part of the article, I discuss recent historical and theoretical contexts, introducing Mark Rifkin's approach to "settler time" as a theoretical lens. I then consider the #sealfie issue, focusing on how Tagaq transformed the attacks on her political stance and personhood as an Inuit mother. In the third part of the article, I expand my discussion to show how Tagaq transforms the epistemic terms of the debate through storytelling and poetry in *Split Tooth.*

Keywords: Tanya Tagaq, political strategy, decolonization, *Split Tooth,* Inuit seal hunting.

Abstract

Este artículo habla de dos textos de la escritora y música inuit Tanya Tagaq para demostrar la necesidad de valorar las relaciones de los inuit con los seres-no-humanos a través de interrupciones decoloniales de tiempo de colonos en Canadá. Es el caso de una fotografía, de amplia difusión, que Tagaq publicó en Twitter en marzo de 2014. En ella se veía a su hija bebé al lado de una foca que acababan de matar, y la novela *Split Tooth* [*Diente roto*]. Utilizando el enfoque teórico de Walter Mignolo sobre gestos decoloniales, examino la fotografía "#sealfie" y la novela como evocaciones textuales de la visión inuit del mundo que fue invisibilizada en gran parte de los comentarios de Twitter sobre la fotografía "#sealfie". Tanto la controversia "#sealfie" como el libro muestran diversas ramificaciones sobre cómo se entiende el difícil proceso de reconciliación entre comunidades inuit y colonos canadienses. La evolución de la forma, la palabra y la imagen de Tagaq permite reacciones lectoras dentro de lo que Mary Louise Pratt llama "zonas de contacto" culturales (1991), donde pequeños cambios en la consciencia de la continuidad y dignidad de la permanente presencia inuit en la tierra, a pesar de la colonización, son posibles. En la primera parte del artículo discuto contextos históricos y teóricos recientes, introduciendo el enfoque de Mark Rifkin sobre "tiempo de colonos" como perspectiva teórica. Luego examino el caso del "#sealfie", enfocándome en cómo Tagaq trató los ataques sobre su postura política y persona como madre inuit. En la tercera parte del artículo, amplío mi discusión para mostrar cómo Tagaq transforma los términos epistémicos del debate a través de la narración y poesía de *Split Tooth*.

Palabras clave: Tanya Tagaq estrategia política, decolonización, *Split Tooth*, caza de focas inuit

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When audiences listen to the Inuk throat singer, avant-garde composer, experimental recording artist, and writer Tanya Tagaq perform, they don't need to be reminded that her style is hard to categorize. Music critics have described it as intense, visceral, explosive, experimental, "like a force of nature," and as one reviewer put it, "unlike anything you have ever heard before" (UBC's School of Music).

This article discusses two texts by Tagaq to demonstrate the need for honoring Inuit relationships with other-than-human beings through decolonial interruptions of settler time in Canada: a well-publicized photograph Tagaq posted on Twitter in March 2014 of her infant daughter beside a freshly killed seal; and Tagaq's first book, *Split Tooth* (2018). Critics and scholars have characterized *Split Tooth* as a dynamic, genre-crossing work (Martin, *Split Tooth;* Beard, Bell, Ghasemi, Hulan). A text that "defies the readers comfort and expectations," the book weaves passages from journals Tagaq kept as a teenager together with retellings of mythical Inuit stories, poetry, and in the audio book version, throat singing between chapters. The book became a best-seller, has been translated into French and German, and won several literary prizes including the Indigenous Voices Award for English Prose in 2019.

Using Walter Mignolo's approach to decolonial gestures, I explore the #sealfie photograph and *Split Tooth* as textured evocations of the Inuit worldview that was rendered invisible in much of the commentary on Twitter about the #sealfie picture. Both the #sealfie controversy and the book have larger ramifications for how the difficult process of reconciliation between Inuit communities and Canadian settlers is understood in the popular imagination as well as in political discourses. The article is structured in three parts: In the first section I introduce historical and theoretical contexts for relating to Tagaq's texts. My intention is to read them on their own terms, to the extent possible from my white-bodied, Western-educated female perspective. In the second part, I delve more deeply into recent historical and political contexts around Tagaq's relationship to seal hunting in Canada. In the third part, I examine the ways in which Tagaq uses form, narration, and image in *Split Tooth* to enact Inuit self-determination that does more than protest the moral high ground claimed by mainstream anti-seal hunting activists. In *Split Tooth,* Tagaq unpacks the message she intended in her 2014 social media post with the picture of a freshly killed seal next to her infant daughter. My reading *of Split Tooth* explores how Tagaq engages in decolonial gestures to delink from the extractive violence and moral entitlement underscoring settler society's attitudes toward animals such as seals and Indigenous humans. In her book, Tagaq shows what it could mean to think, feel, and interact with the living world from lived Inuit experience.

Tagaq, who is from Ikalukutiak in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, has won numerous awards for all her work including the prestigious Polaris Music Prize (2014) and the JUNO Aboriginal Album of the Year (2015) for her album *Animism*. She first gained international attention when she contributed to Björk's *Medulla* album in 2004 and since then has performed with the Winnipeg Symphony and collaborated with the Kronos Quartet (Woloshyn 3). In 2012 the Toronto International Film Festival commissioned her to compose a soundtrack for Robert Flaharty's 1922 silent documentary film, *Nanook of the North*. In 2019, Tagaq, together with Buffy St. Marie and Maxida Märak, composed a concert for the Riddu Riddu Indigenous music festival in Mandalen, Norway. At Riddu Riddu in 2019 Tagaq also gave a reading from *Split*

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Tooth. Underlying Tagaq's shape-shifting artistic acclaim in all these examples is the commitment to advocate for Inuit rights and well-being.

Tagaq is among the many activists and artists for whom it is urgent to address issues of violence against Indigenous women, queer people, and other-than-human beings in North America as epistemic problems rooted in the logic of coloniality and the global domination of Western thought. The logic of coloniality, for Indigenous peoples, is inseparable from the ongoing extractive violence that has led to our planet's climate emergency.[1] Tagaq's interventions in the #sealfie picture and in *Split Tooth* can be understood as decolonial.

Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh distinguish between the "decolonial" and "decolonization." Decolonization refers to the physical shift of political power from a colonizing regime to a nation-state governed by the formerly colonized people who have gained independence. Decoloniality, in contrast, refers to the epistemic project of mentally and culturally disengaging from Western, universalizing ways of understanding time as chronological, landscape as flat and two-dimensional, and personhood as unique to human beings.

Even though much of Mignolo's lived experience and historical writing addresses specific Argentinian and other South American contexts of decolonization, his thinking on decoloniality is relevant transnationally. Similarly, Walsh, while she is from the United States, lives in Equador and writes about Latin American issues, develops "political-pedagogical-epistemic praxis and stances" that are useful beyond any geographical location (Walsh). Decoloniality can be practiced as a part of a larger decolonization process but does not depend on an overthrow of a colonial state to be expressed. Furthermore, it is important to note that decolonial theory does not replace Western thought with a new set of universalizing concepts (Mignolo and Walsh 3). To the contrary, decolonial praxis "seeks to interrupt the idea of the dislocated, disembodied, and disengaged abstraction" (Mignolo and Walsh 3). Decoloniality allows for Western thought, that Mignolo and Walsh note is "in most/all of us, but this does not mean a blind acceptance, nor does it mean a surrendering of North Atlantic fictions" (Mignolo and Walsh 3). Tagaq's art is decolonial, for example, in that she uses the latest music technology and performs for global audiences while staying firmly rooted in Inuit culture and speaking from that perspective. Her work thus lends itself well to decolonial analysis.

One element of Western thought that Tagaq challenges is the idea that Indigenous people are marginalized victims who struggle to be included as citizens with equal rights in modern society; in other words, they are often labeled as individuals and communities in transition from traditional, archaic ways of living to modern life. As such they are regarded either as second-class citizens in need of charitable help from enlightened white people, or as imagined projections of white longing for a lost connection to nature. As Renée Hulan notes, the "two worlds trope" of tradition versus modernity is perpetuated in the global media and in government relations internationally (325). Variations of the two worlds trope are often an

[1] Indigenous scholars who connect these issues include (Sto:lo) Lee Maracle, (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) Mishuana Goeman, (Mohawk) Sarah Deer, and (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. For a discussion of the term extractive violence, see Nachet.

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underexamined ideological backdrop to NGO strategies, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in education, as well as in academic discussions across fields.[2]

Mignolo's approach to "decolonial gesture" is valuable in listening to Indigenous artists, scholars, and activists with the intention of learning from them, rather than assuming they need to be "helped" and included in a competitive global market. For Mignolo, "decolonial gestures" are rituals and ceremonies created in relationship to places, situations, and other beings in a living world. They are generated through embodied movement to disaffiliate the artist and activist from the forces of cultural imperialism that consistently deny their dignity and right to self-determination. Decoloniality, in a positive sense, values qualities embodied in many Indigenous lineages such as consent, reciprocity, generosity, and experimenting (Simpson 57). In a negative sense, Mignolo explains, "Racism and patriarchy are epistemic ontologies. Part of the decolonial strategy is to "dismantle and disobey the categories that built and sustain the colonial matrix" (n.p.). Decolonial gestures complement but are distinct from direct protest actions such as demonstrations, marches, and acts of civil disobedience; as Mignolo and Walsh explain, the kinds of decolonial gestures made by Tagaq are acts of "re-existence" more than the "resistance" that characterizes direct political protest.

Tagaq's art enacts a variety of decolonial gestures rooted in animistic Inuit knowledge. The Inuit worldview includes human beings as part of a larger interdependency of life forms, rather than assuming a hierarchy that places human life at the apex. As Mehdi Ghasemi states in his postmodern ecocritical analysis of *Split Tooth,* Tagaq's narratives "localize knowledge from the perspectives of local Arctic inhabitants and in cases dismantle the essentialist conception of Arctic identity [as an untrodden empty desert] imposed on it for ages" (Ghasemi 348). In other words, Tagaq's narratives speak to truths that honor the intelligences of polar bears, foxes, ice floes, the sun, and Northern Lights as well as human intelligence. Human intelligence thrives in relation to the other life forms rather than imagined as pitted in a struggle against a singular entity called "the Arctic."

Both the #sealfie controversy and the book have larger ramifications for how the long and highly charged process of reconciliation between Inuit communities and

[2] The two worlds trope, introduced in North American by French missionaries in the seventeenth century, has been the subject of extensive critique in Native studies in recent years (Buss and Genetin-Pilawa). A current example of an NGO expression of the two worlds trope is in the Norwegian Save the Children (Redd Barna) vision statement: "Save the Children Norway's program, advocacy and campaign work addresses the rights of the poorest and most marginalized children and towards governments to close the opportunity gaps and ensure equitable progress and outcomes for children" ("Information about Redd Barna"). Although Redd Barna's vision suggests commitment to social justice, some critics and scholars argue that "the end result of the diversity promotion under neoliberalism is that there has been no challenge to the status quo structures of power that have continued to marginalize women and racial minorities." Versions of the two worlds metaphor are not limited to neoliberal institutional goals to achieve diversity, equity, and inclusion. They are shared by some Marxist historians such as Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard who criticize Indigenous people for insisting on their "neolithic" attachments to land, language, and culture (Coulthard and Simpson 252). Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard argue that Marxist goals of eliminating socioeconomic class hierarchies discount Indigenous self-determination as "divisive and reactionary," in contrast to the call by Marxists that oppressed peoples worldwide should join the "enlightening fold of the modern proletariat" (Coulthard and Simpson 252).

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Canadian settlers is understood. Central to the Canadian state's long and difficult process of reconciliation with Canada's original inhabitants are the differences between Inuit and settler state perceptions of time and space. My analysis draws particular attention to these temporal and spatial differences. Tagaq's development of form, word, and image allow for reader responses within what Mary Louise Pratt calls cultural "contact zones" (1991)[3] where decolonial shifts toward awareness of the continuity and dignity of Inuit presence on the land are possible.

My argument builds on previous scholarship by Medhi and Hulan. Both scholars underscore the need to ground analysis of Inuit texts in their communities. Particularly valuable is Hulan's insistence on the need to stay with the local cultural contexts as a way of avoiding the propensity among non-Indigenous people to appropriate (whether intentionally or unintentionally) Indigenous voices and knowledge. The purpose is to amplify the ways in which *Split Tooth* needs to be read as an expression of Tagaq's transformative creativity that honors the collective knowing of Inuit culture. For this reason, it is helpful to provide historical context for my selected texts.

Temporal contexts: Canadian Reconciliation and Protecting the Environment

Among the "Calls to Action" in the 2015 report of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is the promise to use the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a frame for rectifying the harmful legacies of Canadian settler colonialism. Article 29(1) of the Declaration states, "Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). Histories of broken treaty promises aside, there is a deeper issue at stake: How to relate to Indigenous peoples on their own terms, not as a category of the population that supports Canada's commitment as a state, by charter, to multiculturalism, but rather as peoples and cultures that inhabit many different landscapes across the North American continent. The practice of "protecting the environment" can look quite different for Anishinabeg residents of Toronto protecting their rights to maple sugaring in the city than it does for Inuit in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut (with a population of 1760 in 2021) defending traditional seal-hunting rights.

As the Idle No More Movement has demonstrated, however, at a grassroots level, Indigenous peoples can be emboldened to stand up for themselves and the stewardship of their lands across tribes and geographies through decolonial action. The movement began in 2012 to protest the 2012 C-38 Omnibus Bill introduced by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's administration that revamped the 1876 Indian Act. This bill virtually sanctioned the government to ignore treaties with Aboriginal communities where the goals of resource extraction from the land interfered with the treaty terms (About the Movement). Ever since, "Idle No More" has represented both the direct actions at the level of communities and has been a metaphor for embodied,

[3] Pratt defines "contact zones" as tropes for visualizing solutions to conflicts, figurative and actual spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with relationships of asymmetrical power (1991).

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decolonial bottom-up activism in a broader sense. Its widespread media attention has garnered both growing support and violent pushback to their goals from non-Indigenous Canadians.

Tagaq, through her creative cultural interventions in writing, speaking, and performance, participates in the aims of the Idle No More movement. A useful analytical lens for reading her work is the one developed by literary and cultural studies scholar Mark Rifkin. Rifkin's insights into temporality are useful for making sense of why and how the actions of white-identifying persons and groups are written into the historical record as necessary and important, and why the interests of Indigenous voices are usually disregarded. For Rifkin, the idea of "settler time" expresses the temporal underpinnings of the North American frontier myth that justified calls for Indigenous assimilation, relocation, and genocide. The idea of the frontier, although usually associated with the myth of United States expansion across the geographical landscape, is equally relevant for explaining the Canadian idea of its "civilizing" mission in the wilderness as chronicled by Susanna Moodie's iconic *Roughing it in the Bush* of Ontario (1852). It also helps explain the drive westward from events such the Klondike gold rush in Yukon territory during the 1890s, to the national government's forced relocation of Inuit communities in northern Quebec to the high Arctic during the 1950s. The government wanted to use them for its geopolitical purpose of populating the northern Canadian regions to counter the growing US military presence in the Arctic during the Cold War, and to discourage Greenlandic hunters who were supposedly poaching on Canadian lands. Inuit communities in northern Quebec were told that they would find rich hunting ground in the high Arctic. They were also promised, falsely, that they could return to their homes in Quebec in two years (Inuit High Arctic Relocations in Canada).

More recently, the idea of the frontier motivated seismic testing for petroleum and natural gas deposits in the Arctic waters of the Inuit community of Clyde River on Baffin Island from 2014 to 2017. In 2018, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled unanimously in favor of the legal action taken by the Clyde River community demanding a halt to the testing. The ruling has been described as "a tremendous Inuit and environmental victory," which unfortunately does not imply that a more widespread change in consciousness has taken place. In a related ruling on the same day as the Clyde River decision, the Canadian Supreme Court ruled against the Chippewas in the Thames River First Nations Appeal (Inuit Victory). [4] Rifkin's analysis is pertinent to interpreting the communities' relationships with the Canadian state in both examples. For Rifkin, in the settler time paradigm embodied in the frontier myth, Indigenous peoples are imagined as relics of a tragically lost connection to a pristine natural world. More immediately, the settler time framework assumes that contemporary Indigenous peoples "belong to a present" defined by Euro-American settler ideologies that take for granted the time marked by progress from primitive to modern sensibilities, and from underdevelopment to civilization.

Tagaq's superstar success in reaching a broad international audience suggests both that she is already part of a "shared present" with viewers and readers from a wide variety of backgrounds and places. Equally striking, the form, images, sounds,

[4]For more background on the Clyde River case, see Sevunts.

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and ideas she develops suggest that the "present" time and place from which she speaks is quite different from the one inhabited by the consumer subjects of social media as well as the white citizens with the moral impulse to "help" members of marginalized Indigenous communities become full-fledged, supported participants in Canadian society.

Animal rights activists used a villain-victim-hero narrative to mount strong anti-sealing campaigns starting in the 1970s. Relying on emotional language, they have continued to circulate images of fluffy, whitecoat harp seal pups needing protection even though hunting whitecoat baby seals has been illegal in Canada since 1987 ("Myths and Realities"). In 2009, Animal Rights groups convinced EU representatives to implement the European Regulation (EC) No 1007/2009, a ban on the market for seal products. In the spirit of wanting to support Indigenous peoples in functioning fully as Canadian citizens, they granted an exception for seal pelts harvested and exported by Inuit hunters. Animal rights spokespersons from PETA emphasized that their opposition was directed not as the Inuit whom they saw as largely "subsistence" hunters whose economies they saw as removed from global market. Rather, PETA underscored that their organization targeted the large-scale cruelty of the commercial, profit-driven enterprises in Newfoundland on the east coast that catered to the greed for luxury seal products ("Canada's Seal Hunt Controversy" 1:03:05).

Despite these claims that at first glance seem to respect the rights of Inuit hunters, the actions of PETA reinforce the settler approach to environmental advocacy. As George Wenzel notes, this view relies on "ethnocentrically derived universalist perceptions of animal rights" (Wenzel 41, qtd. in Rule 744). These patriarchal white supremacist views do not consider how Indigenous knowledges valuing relationality over extraction have contributed to Indigenous survival long after their own worlds were colonized. To the contrary, the PETA spokespersons socialized to accept universalist perceptions of animal rights assume they are entitled to be stewards of the land. Their statement implies the right to grant Inuit communities permission to hunt seals. The exception to the commercial seal hunting ban is based, however, not on a recognition of Indigenous land-based laws of kinship that include the interdependence between human and other-than-human lives. Rather, Inuit hunters are exempted because as "subsistence" hunters, they extract fewer resources than their greedy commercial seal hunting counterparts. This reasoning implies that extractive violence to some degree governs all human relationships to the land.

PETA's actions are based on ideas of individual moral choice that deny the historical legacies of, and institutional presence of colonialism, genocide, and land theft. Instead, as Elizabeth Rule notes, they appeal to what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's have identified as "settler moves to innocence" (Rule 743). In contrast to the lucrative settler environmentalist campaigns, Inuit community spokespersons note that none of the profits made by PETA, Greenpeace, or any of the other anti-sealing commercial campaigns have been returned to Indigenous people ("Canada's Seal Hunt Controversy" 1:04). Tagaq observes, "There are reserves in Canada which are like third world countries… All the groceries have to be flown up, and you would not believe how much they cost. I have seen a roast for $130 in the store" (Khaleeli, qtd.

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in Rule 745). In effect, the EU ban has had devasting consequences for the Canadian Inuit (Farquhar 15-16).

Seals, "sealfies" and decolonial interruptions of settler time

Given this everyday struggle in Nunavut, the digital movement that has become known as the "Sealfie" campaign of 2014 was motivated as a response to American comedian and television celebrity Ellen DeGeneres's $1.5 million donation to the Humane Society in support of its annual anti-seal hunting campaign launch (Rogers and Scobie 70). Degeneres followed her donation with an emotional anti-sealing statement at the 2014 Oscar Ceremonies and a Twitter "selfie" of Degeneres with other supporting celebrities Bradley Cooper, Jennifer Lawrence, Brad Pitt, and Meryl Streep. Their selfie became the most retweeted Twitter post of 2014 (Jarvey). The "Sealfie" campaign played on the words "selfie" and "seal" to convey the connections Indigenous people throughout the world have to the seal hunt, and their pride in those ties (Rule 742).

Tagaq's photo shows her daughter looking toward the camera with her fat baby cheeks. She is wrapped in three layers of caps and blue and white onesies, lying what seems to be comfortably padded on a rocky beach next to the adult seal, its arms and paws parallel to the baby's. In an interview she reflected on the ignorance that technological society has given rise to around eating animals:

> People don't understand why I posted this picture of my baby next to a seal, it's because most people who eat meat will see an animal carcass lying on the ground and say "EWWWWW!" I think that's so funny. In one bite you're eating a piece of its muscle, but you're disgusted by the rest of it. We're all meat. We're all from that same thing. When a thing gives its life for you, you have to be able to be thankful. If that animal is sick or miserable, you're eating that too. It's really embarrassing that humanity has reduced itself to this technological idiocy. (Rogers, Janet)

Considering that Tagaq's celebrity status gave her post widespread global attention, her stance as proud to be an Indigenous woman, mother, and carrier of Inuit culture triggered a backlash of violent tweets against Tagaq. Tweets questioned her mothering abilities, saying for example that "She should have the baby taken off her"; "Nothing like putting your baby next to a dead body for fun"; "Pretty SICK 2 take a pic of a baby laying next 2 a bludgeoned baby seal" (qtd. in Woloshyn 7). Tagaq even received death threats daily for several months following her post.

As Rule argues in her excellent *American Quarterly* article, the backlash against Tagaq is part of both an "immediate threat to Indigenous women's lives and a systematic attack on Indigenous nations and cultures" (Rule). Rule and numerous other Indigenous studies scholars have argued that assaults on Indigenous motherhood and violence against Indigenous women are endemic to settler colonialism (Rule 749). Although the local police took the attacks against Tagaq seriously and the Twitter accounts of some of the death-threatening tweeters were closed, cases of over 2000 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada have still not been addressed by the Canadian government. The widespread international calls for accountability finally resulted in a national

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inquiry and in 2019 the report of the National Inquiry in Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (*Reclaiming Power and Place*). Even though Canada has done more to address the issue than the United States has, as of 2024, the Canadian legal and law enforcement systems remain unable to see that violence against Indigenous women is a problem of systemic gendered and racialized violence. It is not a problem that can be adequately dealt with only at the level of individual offenders (Rule 750). Unfortunately, as of June 2023, only two of the 231 calls for attention to areas needing reform had been completed, and more than half had not even been started ("A Report Card").

Tagaq has responded directly to the attacks against Inuit and Indigenous women through her art, and in speeches, interviews, and social media posts. Perhaps the event that brought her the most visibility was her Polaris Music Prize acceptance speech she gave for her album *Animism.* As she spoke about how "people are losing their minds over seals," behind Tagaq a scrolling screen showed pictures of the faces of 1200 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women ("Tanya Tagaq Fires Back"). She used her subsequent promotion of *Animism,* and, as I will discuss, her writing in *Split Tooth* as a way of transforming the vitriolic media attention that targeted her as a person to a wider assertion of Indigenous dignity and the transformative power of art.

In fact, Tagaq says that she was not prepared for the violent reactions she received on social media. It is ironic that in an interview where Tagaq discusses the #sealfie picture, she suggests how her #sealfie was not simply a reaction to PETA and other animal rights advocates. The picture was, to use Belcourt's term an expression of Inuit "life-making" at a particular time and place. She had been visiting an elder's camp with her infant daughter, drinking tea. A young hunter, nephew to one of the elders, came in with a freshly caught seal. Tagaq remembers how happy the group was "to have the seal for the fur, for tanning, and to eat. You can weave the intestines together to make rope. Every single part of that beautiful animal is used. One of the traditions is to melt the snow in your mouth and then put it in the seal's mouth so their spirit isn't thirsty in the afterlife. It is a deep respect" (Tagaq, qtd. in Rule 745). The picture, juxtaposing the child next to the seal, expresses the sense of mutuality and interdependence, an equality of being that is at the same time an honoring of the ways in which every part of the seal is a gift to humans. The sense of gratitude for the seal's life, and the reciprocity of human relationships with seals is embodied in the ceremony of putting the melted snow into the seal's mouth.

A closer look at the human baby next to the seal leads the viewer of the picture to recognize the similar but different bodies of seals and humans, with our shared need for breath, nourishment, and protection from the cold climate. There is also a sense of fragility to both lives, as both humans and seals are subject to the life cycles from birth, suggested by the infant human, and death as suggested by the newly caught seal. In a larger sense, the scene as Tagaq documented it testifies to the fragility of all living beings in a world where humans are not universally entitled to do what they want with animals. In the next part of the article, I consider the ways in which Tagaq expands on these expressions of Indigenous life-making

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that further delink her Inuit voice from settler colonial epistemological frameworks.

Split Tooth interruptions of settler time

Tagaq makes three kinds of decolonial gestures in *Split Tooth* that I will now delve into: the first is in the book's title and cover art; the second, in the narrative structure. The third one that comprises most of my analysis is her use of Inuit myth. As the title, "Split Tooth" is an image that alludes to a visceral experience of embodied pain, but also the embodied historical trauma of boarding school survival, and the continued verbal and physical violence against Indigenous women. Tagaq names these connections in the dedication of the book to survivors of the residential schools and to the MMIW. The comic artist Jaime Fernandez's drawing on the cover supports her defense of Indigenous rights at another level. A white fox gazes at the viewer from a black background reminding us of the polar night sky and landscape of snow and ice, and, paradoxically, that the issues only appear to be a matter of black and white political stances. In some editions of the book, the background is white, and in a video promoting the book, the cover is animated. This and the other drawings by Fernandez illustrating the book affirm the persistent presence of animal life as respected, dynamic, and influential participants in Inuit life.

A second decolonial interruption is in the structure of the narrative: the narrator's coming of age story weaves a series of shapeshifting stories about relationships between humans and other-than-human lives that alternate between registers and forms. Taken as a whole, we can see how they are inspired by *katajjak* throat singing, traditionally performed by women in pairs. *Katajjjak* can take the form of imitating other-than-human sounds of birds, animals, the wind, or the Northern Lights; or it can be a lullaby. There are also competition *katajjak* songs where two women play a game where one riffs off a sound the other makes, to create an increasing crescendo that finally ends in laughter when they are out of breath ("Katajjacoustic").

The reader can see this effect in the way Tagaq's narration combines various forms and styles drawn, for example, from everyday events in the life of her teenage narrator, dream sequences, free verse poems that play with white space on the page, and essay-like passages of philosophical reflection joining personal and collective memory. Much of the book, according to Tagaq in an interview, is lifted almost directly from journals she kept as a teenager. The form of a personal journal is expanded through a structure that anchors the reader through a series of short chapters. Some have titles noting the year in which its events take place: 1975, 1978, and 1982. Other chapters are untitled. Some have descriptors such as "Nine Mile Lake" while others allude to tone, mood, and theme such as "The Topography of Pity." Considered as a whole, the structure of the chapters traces the narrator's developing consciousness. For example, the chapter early in the book entitled "Nine Mile Lake" includes a scene on the tundra that interweaves lived experience with imagination and spirituality: as the narrator and her friends pretend to be seagulls, she "[feels] the energy of the fish's life readily absorbed into my body, and its death throes became a shining and swimming beacon into the sky" (*Split Tooth* 27). Hunter and hunted,

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death and rebirth, and reality and imagination are woven together to connect hunter and prey with the cycles of life, death, and rebirth in a new form. The passage, then, functions at two levels of narrative perspective: it recounts a diary-like day in the life from the teenage character's perspective, and it represents the view of a more experienced, reflective older narrator. The perspective of the older narrator is often metaphorical, as in the passage where a fish become a "shining and swimming beacon" (27).

The scene from "Nine Mile Lake" at the beginning of the book is refracted in a scene in the second half of the book where the narrator, seven years later, is being supported through her pregnancy by an older woman in the community named Helen. Helen exudes "hunger for energy that is outside of food, outside of sex, and outside of violence." For the narrator, "This [space] is peace. This is safety" (*Split Tooth* 136). At the same time, the peace and safety Helen embodies holds "the torment of her memories" (136). She has "a network of scars on the tops of her hands" (149). The network suggests stories that "unravel" when she tells the narrator the story of how she once killed a man. The network scar image on her hands is reinforced in what follows as the narrator's sense that Helen has a story that has been kept silent. The story, she writes, is a threat that "unravels" (159). Helen recounts how she murdered a man who tried to hurt her little sister: "She pushed him out of a boat and into a fish net, only to let him drown" (150). These images convey not only the idea that book is dedicated to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women; the reader feels the violation of the ongoing gendered, racist violence alongside the power of story told in the presence of an empathetic witness to heal the damage. As such, Tagaq gathers the material of the story with storytelling as a figurative act of weaving memories for a fiercely reparative, decolonial gesture.

Another layer of the structure is a two-part form that might not be immediately obvious. In the second half of the book, the narration lets go of any direct distinctions between everyday teenage events, dreams, and reflections on animal-human interactions; she does not, for example, tell the reader "I knew I was dreaming" as she did in the first part in one section about a dream she had about a fox. To reinforce the sense of flow, in the second part, fewer chapters have titles. At the same time, the narrator in the second part develops more clarity and confidence in her sense of power and agency, and she is more willing to reveal the first names of characters she introduces such as Helen, Savik, and Naja. In comparison, the names of characters we have previously met, like Uncle, Best Boy, Alpha, and my father, are known by the role they play in the narrator's personal experience.

The third decolonial gesture *in Split* Tooth I now consider in detail is her use of Inuit myth as a way of responding, rather than reacting, to historical trauma and gendered violence. Much like Tayo's ceremony of healing in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), the narrator's healing process is a ceremony supported by human characters like Helen, and by non-human characters. The process begins with the chapter "1982": "I was seventeen. Sent back home from residential school after a suicide attempt" (83). The narrator finds the "curfews and duties" that come with her return to Cambridge Bay as "comforting after the chaos of high school" (83). The "1982" chapter opens an extended narration that can be read as an unfolding narrative of healing that comes not from settler state demands to testify in courts

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about boarding school abuses. Rather, she works through the trauma together with family members and neighbors. Her healing happens on the tundra and in icy water inhabited by life-giving and life-taking mythical figures, ice, bears, seals, and Northern Lights.

The most dramatic shift from representations of trauma to trauma healing in the book comes through the story of Sedna; first, in a version of the mythical story told by the narrator, and second, as a first-person narration where the reader sees that the narrator herself shape-shifts into a decolonial Sedna. The first version of the story begins with the narrator's introduction of the "Inuit Sea Goddess who came before Christianity" (85). Sedna, in the old story, lives alone with her father since her mother died when Sedna was a girl. Her father decides, as she is reaching "the age of blooming" that it is time for him to find her a marriage partner. She resolutely refuses the many suitors he invites to visit her. His hopes are finally thwarted the day the daughter comes to him in tears with the news that she is pregnant. The father of the child to be is the shapeshifter form of her lead dog-whom Sedna had had sex with, even in his dog form. In a rage, the father decides she deserves to be killed, in part because she had refused to marry a person he had chosen for her, and in part because she had sex with her dog.[5] The father grabs her and drags her to his kayak where he paddles to sea, cuts off her fingers, and throws her to her death in the icy water. Sedna sinks, but the blood from her fingers clots to form the sea creatures who become her pets. "They allowed her to breathe and to live under the water. She became the master of all sea creatures" (86). Angry with humans, "Sedna liked to watch the humans starve. The only way to placate her is to send a shaman to the bottom of the ocean to sing her lullabies and comb her hair in hopes that she would release some of the creatures for human consumption and alleviate the famine" (87).

The various life forms in the Sedna story hold power that must be respected, while Sedna's power is shaped through her relationships with the other-than-human beings she helps to create. What stands out is the absence of an abstract moral code for right and wrong that guides the Judeo-Christian Old Testament stories where justice is served through punishment. Sedna's father is not a clear villain since the reader is told that his reason for wanting his daughter to marry was to "respect his long-deceased wife by naming a child after her" (85). Sedna herself is a victim of her father's violence and a perpetrator. She takes revenge on all humans by gleefully seeing them starve unless a shaman goes to the ocean floor to sing to her and comb her hair (87). As a guide for action, the story does not judge the father for harming his daughter, nor does it judge Sedna for taking her anger out on humans who did not do her harm. The story does remind its listeners to show reciprocity in our relationships both with humans and other-than-humans. Life energy, taken away, does not disappear but transforms into another form as the blood from her father's violent murder takes new shape as sea creatures.

In the world of the story, although collective survival is often at state, it is not threatened by the systematic violence of settler colonialism. As such, the story

[5] See Laugrand and Oosten for an anthropological commentary on the special status of dogs in Inuit society. The authors discuss how dogs have human identities and names (91). The authors note that the myth of a young girl who does not want to marry and then marries a dog is well-known throughout the Arctic (94).

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provides an opening into what a decolonial animal studies could look like. Billy-Ray Belcourt argues that mainstream animal activisms, because they do not examine the settler colonialism that created the conditions for the extractive violence of the commercial seal hunt and factory farms, end up reinventing the imagined binaries of a struggle between moral good and evil. Because they do not question that they are morally good, they cannot see how paradoxical their claim to the defense of animal lives is. At first glance, mainstream animal advocacy is a direct challenge to the Old Testament idea that God gave humans "dominion over the creatures of the earth." However, Belcourt observes that their choice to protect only some animal lives reveals the extent to which the logic of settler colonialism guides their moral reasoning. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, "white humans are saving animals from brown humans" (Montford and Taylor 4). Belcourt notes that within mainstream animal activism, animal lives are imagined into being as projections of white longing for harmony with a benevolent nature. To realize this fantasy, they erase the lives of actual Indigenous peoples who mirror back to white people a more uncomfortable view of themselves. Similarly, white humans often feel entitled to decide which Indigenous people are worthy of inclusion in white institutional spaces, and which ones, like the "unfit mother" Tagaq's social media attackers imagine, deserve punishment.[6]

Living tradition to interrupt settler time

As a decolonial gesture, the Sedna story provides Tagaq with an opportunity to resist settler colonial violence. At one level, Tagaq had taken on the role of a justifiably enraged Sedna when she gave her Polaris Prize speech with the moving screen behind her with the pictures of 1200 missing and murdered Indigenous women. Her angry statement, "Fuck PETA" motivated her reaction to the attacks she had received on social media-a direct protest not possible for the murdered women or for many who did not survive the residential schools.

At another level, Tagaq's narrator in *Split Tooth* moves beyond protest to offer readers the chance to consider how conditions lead humans to harm each other and the earth. The narrator in *Split Tooth* joins Sedna's story in the lines, "Wait. I need to talk to Sedna and tell her to keep her treasures. Humans have damned themselves and it has nothing to do with Satan, it has only to do with greed. What will Sedna do when she hears the seismic testing?"[7] (87). Temporality at this moment in the narrative is infused with ways of knowing that move across empirical boundaries between myth, recent history, dream, and everyday experience.

Significantly, the narrator's "wait" is addressed to the reader in the second person imperative form of the verb. It signals readers to consider how the Sedna story could relate to us in the settler colonial world outside the text, since we all partake in it. In the narration that follows, the narrator herself does not "wait" to act however, but instead keeps running toward a series of other-than-human beings and events

[6] In a scholarly context, Belcourt argues convincingly for decolonizing Critical Animal Studies.
[7] Tagaq's narrator refers to the seismic testing for oil and gas off the coast of Clyde River that was banned in 2017 (Butler).

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that move between myth, dream, and reality. Not for a moment does the narrator construct a pristine nature that provides a healing balm for the residential school traumas that could have led her to a suicide attempt; there is movement toward healing in an Inuit way through her story: The narrator, running across the tundra in the weeks after her return from boarding school, gets so hungry that she cuts off a piece of her leg to keep from starving. The ice, she tells us, turns into a bear whom she marries. Freezing cold, "The ice breaks into small pieces and I am plunged into the water. It is so cold that it burns. Treading the water and feeling the life leave my body, I accept" (93).

The acceptance leads to her return to consciousness, followed by an intensively visceral sexual awakening on the sea ice. The Northern Lights, then, set her vagina on fire. When she returns to her family and neighbors in town, she is not only pregnant, but has gained new confidence and freedom from her usual fear and anxiety. As she gives birth, the Northern Lights "come down into the igloo and cover my body like a blanket. This experience is the exact opposite of the last one" (153). The children come out each as three feet long green slime "not much thicker than their umbilicus. Yet the narrator's heart "bursts with love," but Helen, acting as midwife, is shot in the eye with umbilical cords and freezes. Fortunately, as the narrator is sure will happen, they soon become human twins, a boy Savik and a girl Naja (154). While Naja embodies the receptive, kind, gentle characteristics expected of a girl, Savik grows into an angry, ill-intentioned boy whom she fears is bringing illness and death to the community. Her uncle dies, her father falls ill but then recovers, and her boyfriend (who Helen thinks is the father of the twins) then gets sick. These events convince the narrator that Savik is responsible for death and illness and needs to be killed before he does more harm to the community.

At this point in the story, the narrator could seem to be reversing the gender roles in the Sedna myth; where in the mythical version the father is the killer of his child; here the mother harms her children. However, this story resists settler colonial binary thinking in that it complicates any sense that one gender is guilty and the other innocent, or that one gender perpetrates, and the other is victimized. The narrator's father recovers from his illness, and the reader does not know whether the narrator's boyfriend regains his strength. Nor does it work to make a parallel between Savik (who shows signs of becoming a violent adult man), and his potential as a rapist and murderer like the assailants of the many MMIW: Savik's apparent victims are all men, not women. Another correspondence that does not quite fit is the parallel to Helen's story of having killed a man who was trying to harm her sister. Much of the blame the narrator assigns to Savik is based on fear and speculation of what he may have caused, not what he did. Finally, the narrator makes the mistake of bringing Naja along with Savik to the ice. She forgets about her daughter in her passion to strangle Savik, watching him look at her in fear turned to anger, and then becoming a baby seal. Although Naja freezes to death, she then falls into the water to join her brother. Neither child becomes a victim in that they both shape-shift into seals.

The deaths of her children can be read as a counterpoint to the narrator's earlier call to "wait" issued before she began her transformation into a contemporary Sedna. In this scene, the reader might wonder if she had not realized when she decided to speak with Sedna, that in calling for Sedna's keeping her treasures for

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herself because the humans had damned themselves, the narrator herself might be one of the "damned." The reader can also see a parallel between the scene where the children turn into seals and Tagaq's #sealfie as it juxtaposes the seal with her child. Suggestions of redemption aside, in the final pages of *Split Tooth*, the narrator expresses an outpouring of regret, grief, and guilt through a poem that ends with her affirmation, "I forgive me" (188). The book's final line speaks directly to the reader: "Start again" (189).

The influence of Christian guilt, shame, and the longing for redemption co-exist in the final section of the book along with an assertion of Indigenous survivance. Tagaq reminds the reader that Inuit epistemology is not a totalizing worldview that replaces settler colonialism's legacy of Christianity. Rather, Inuit spirituality has not been erased by a colonial mindset. The narrator demonstrates this co-existence when she recalls her Christian grandmother telling the narrator that she was destined to go to Hell. However, her grandmother's prophecy was not quite in line with the orthodox Christian belief in either salvation or damnation; she had predicted that the narrator would be one of the few who would survive Hell. As such the grandmother could have been poking fun of Christians who believe in eternal damnation, and her granddaughter might not have quite understood the joke. Whatever the case, both grandmother and granddaughter transform the Judeo-Christian binaries of good and evil into the promise of a continuing narrative. The narrator's own story of shapeshifting into a contemporary Sedna provides a provocative opening for the Tagaq's readers to imagine a world not defined by human extractive violence. Her Sedna story expresses the possibility of co-creating a world through kinship between humans, through the power of story, and it attests to the interdependence of human and animal lives.

To return to where I began this article, respecting Indigenous rights to the "conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands" as stated in the U.N. Declaration, demands a stepping outside the parameters of settler time and a refusal to engage in the kind of moves to settler innocence represented by the celebrities and their non-Indigenous supporters in the anti-sealing movement. Tagaq's #sealfie fallout and the ways she then shaped the subsequent debate, demonstrate this truth. Moreover, as the interwoven voices and stories in *Split Tooth* suggest, any meaningful critique of colonization as ideological structure and not an event, as Patrick Wolfe asserts in his often-cited "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," must listen especially to Indigenous voices in contact zones such as narrative, where listening becomes possible (Kauanui 2). In our 21st century globally connected present, the ongoing tragedy of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women is still not a priority for settler governments and cultures. This is the case even as celebrities champion their moral high ground in the name of preventing cruelty to animals. Tagaq's refusal to adapt her voice to the expectations of white audiences is a powerful reminder to pay attention to *whose* present we see and hear in this historical moment.

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