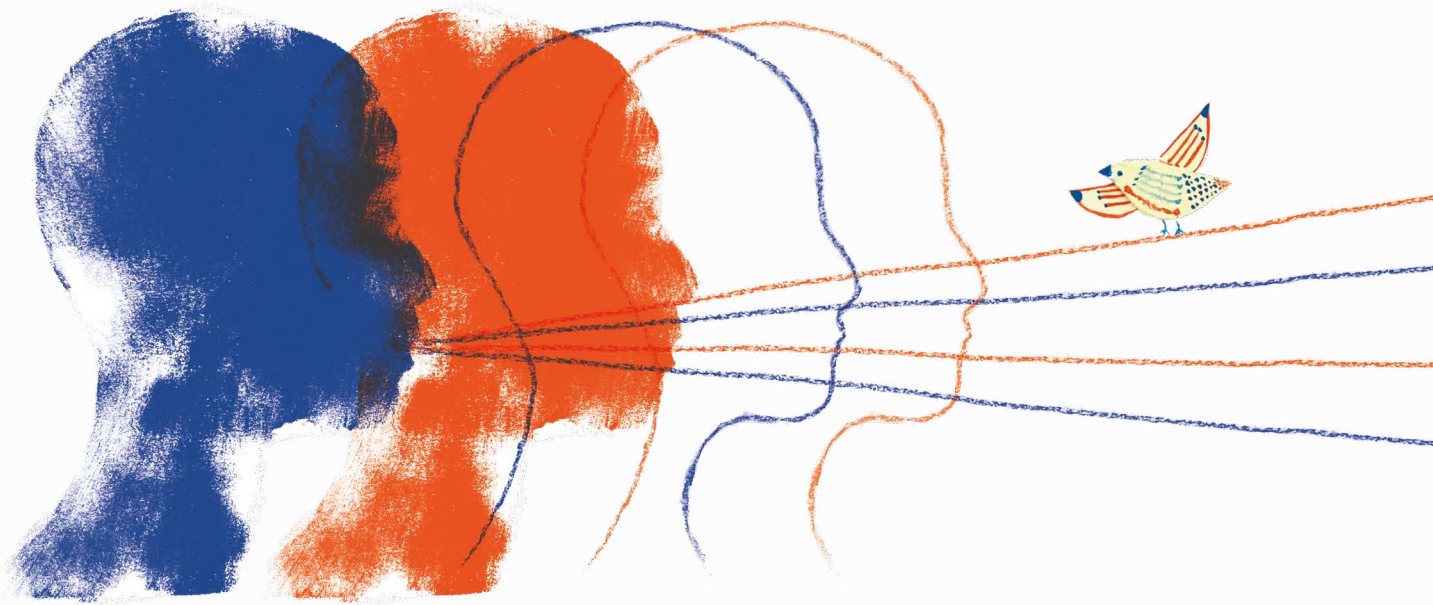


Haydée Silva*
Illustrations by Xanic Galván**

From Canada to Mexico

The Voices of Contemporary Innu Poetry¹



The French language, known as “the language of Molière” is also, of course, the language of Voltaire, Victor Hugo, and Baudelaire. All white males born in France. Though women writers have participated in French literature since its beginnings, their work has not always enjoyed its due recognition. Fortunately, with the passing of the decades, we have broadened our view of French literature to include Marguerite Duras, Marguerite Yourcenar, and Amélie Nothomb as well, for example. All of them women, yes, but also white and European. The francophone-Canadian Émile Nelligan, Gaston Miron, Michel Tremblay, Gabrielle Roy, and Anne Hébert are less well-known among the Mexican public, but they are all exceptional. From a decolonizing perspective, the diversification of the literary canon has progressed slowly but has nonetheless advanced in

multiple directions, as evidenced by the 2013 entry of Dany Laferrière —a Canadian intellectual, writer, and playwright born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti— into the Académie Française; by the Vietnamese Kim Thúy’s success; and, more recently, by the awarding of the Governor General’s Award for French-language poetry to Innu writers Maya Cousineau-Mollen and Rita Mestokosho in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

The Innu nation —composed of two autonomous communities, namely the Naskapi to the north and the “Montagnais” to the south— is of Algonquian ethnicity. For 8,000 years, the Innu have inhabited the forests north of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence in eastern Canada, an ancestral territory spanning 1,000,000 km² that they call Nitassinan. According to the 2021 census, the Innu population includes around 20,000 people, of which 8,130 speak the Innu-aimun language —for comparison, we might note that the Condesa neighborhood in Mexico City has a population of about 8,450 residents across 69 hectares, though, during the workday, the population rises to 20,000.

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The Innu, a people small in number, compared to other Canadian First Nations, have survived and resisted the ravages of unbending colonization with singular force. Colonization forced them to abandon their nomadic way of life, pillaging the resources of their land and, between 1880 and 1995, systematically tearing their children away from their communities so as to “educate” them at the infamous residential schools for Indigenous people. Today, the Innu continue to suffer the consequences of a history of violence and discrimination, expressed, for example, in their lower-than-average life expectancy, serious problems with alcoholism and drug addiction, and a high rate of femicides. In her book *Nanimissuat. Île-tonnerre* (2018), Natasha Kanapé-Fontaine writes the following:

<i>Nous sommes mortes</i>	Estamos muertas	We're dead
<i>Ensevelies</i>	Sepultadas	And buried
<i>Sous des pluies diluviennes</i>	Bajo lluvias torrenciales	Beneath the torrent
<i>De migrantes</i>	De migrantes	Of migrants
<i>D'assassinées</i>	De asesinadas	Women murdered
<i>Disparues</i>	Desaparecidas	And disappeared
[...]	[...]	[...]
<i>Un bûcher</i>	Una hoguera	A bonfire
<i>Sous nos robes</i>	Bajo nuestros vestidos	Beneath our dresses
<i>Où nous submergeons</i>	Donde sumergimos	Where we drown
<i>Les agressions</i>	Las agresiones	Assault
<i>Les assauts</i>	Los asaltos	And aggression
[...]	[...]	[...]
<i>Nous avançons</i>	Avanzamos	We go forth
<i>Nues</i>	Desnudas	Naked
<i>Pour le passage</i>	Buscando el paso	On the path
 <i>Nous avançons</i>	 Avanzamos	 We go forth
<i>Sans atteindre l'aurore.</i>	<i>Sin llegar al alba.</i>	And expect no dawn.

Yet, we should not simply view the Innu nation through victimhood: in Nitassinan, powerful voices are questioning Native reality from diverse spaces, including the political and the literary. In 1944—the year in which the diplomatic relationship between Mexico and Canada begun—Innu writer and activist An Antane Kapeshe was only 18 years old. She still lived a nomadic life, following the traditions of her people. At age 30, however, she was forced to relocate to the Malietenam reserve. In 1976, she became the first Innu author to publish a book, *Eukeuan nin matashi-manitu innushkueu. Je suis une maudite sauvagesse* (I'm a damned savage). This bilingual book has been foundational to Native Canadian literature in general and to Innu literature in particular. In it, the author denounces the ravages of colonialism, perceptible then and now. The text begins as follows: *Kauapishit ka ui apashtat kie ka ui pikunak nitassinannu, apu ut natuenitamuut auennua kie apu ut kukuetshimat innua miam tshetshi tapuetakukue*. (“Quand le Blanc a voulu exploiter et détruire notre territoire, il n’a demandé de permission à personne, il n’a pas demandé aux Indiens s’ils étaient d’accord.”) That is, “When the White man sought to exploit and destroy our land, he didn’t ask for permission, he didn’t ask the Indians if they agreed.” Her pulsating claim has echoed far and wide among Indigenous youth. The long-silenced voice of An Antane Kapeshe is now being heard once again thanks to the 2019 publication of a new edition of her book. The last phrase of the epigraph to *I’m a damned savage* says: *Kie nipa minueniten tshetshi uapataman kutak innu tshetshi mashinaitshet e*

innushtenit (“And I’d be happy to see other Indians write in an Indigenous language”). The Innu, and especially Innu women, have made and continue to make important contributions to universal literature, in Innu-aimun and in French. Their poetic contributions stand out: there’s a reason why, in the Innu-aimu language, poetry is called *Kashekau-aimun* —literally meaning “word of pride.”

Among the most notable Innu poetic voices today, we have Joséphine Bacon, born in 1947. Born in a minority First Nation within Canada’s francophone minority, in a family with no money or power, at age five, she was torn away from her people, her language, and her culture and was forced to attend a residence, as she writes in *Kau minuat. Une fois de plus* (2023):

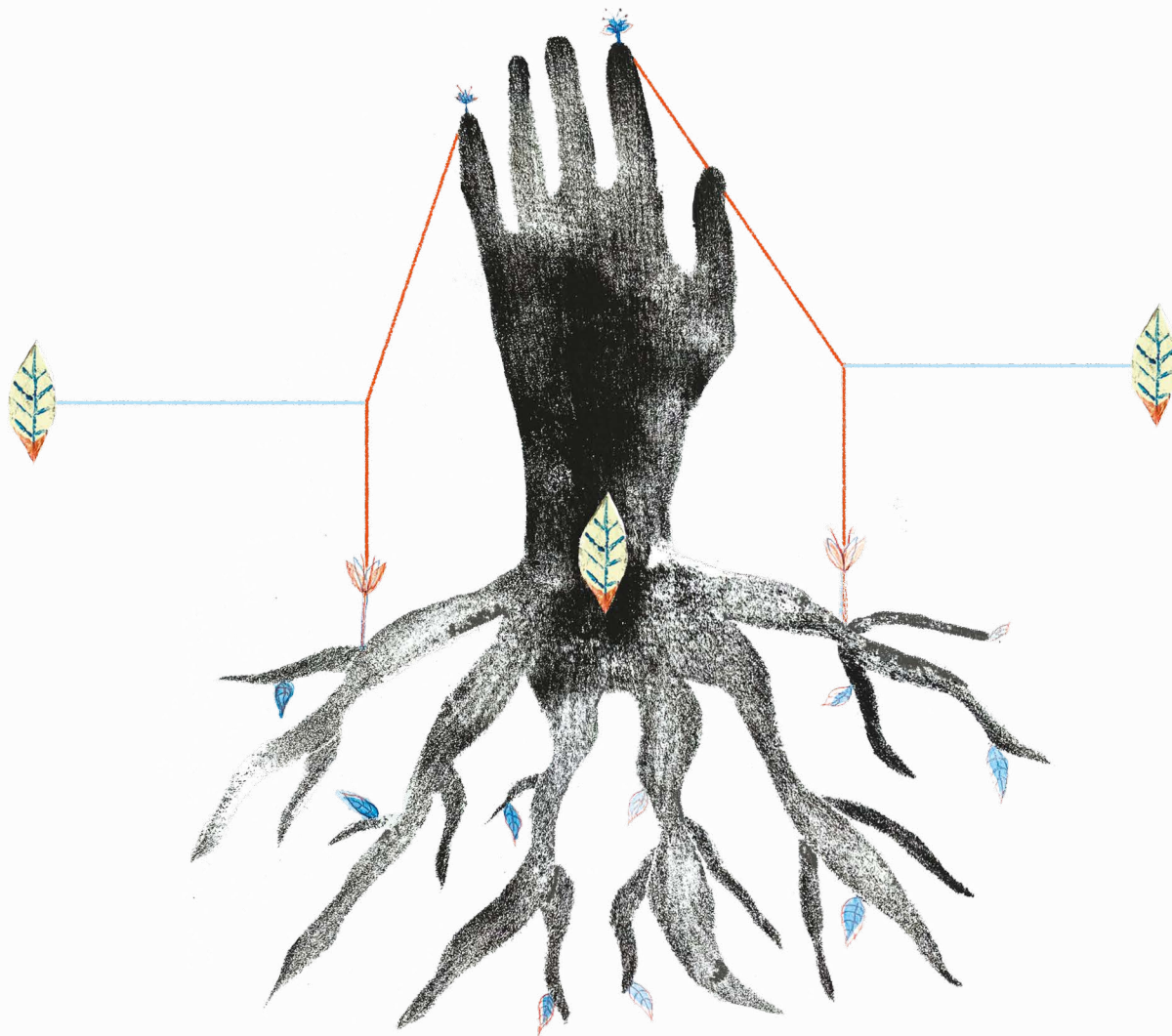
<i>Tshutin nitshinat</i>	<i>Tu m'arraches à ma famille</i>	Me arrancas de mi familia	You rip me away from my family
<i>Tshutinen nitinnu-inniun</i>	<i>Tu m'arraches à ma culture</i>	Me arrancas de mi cultura	You rip me away from my culture
<i>Tshutinen nitinnu-aimun</i>	<i>Tu m'arraches à ma langue</i>	Me arrancas de mi lengua	You rip out my tongue
<i>Tshinapain tatumitashumitannuetatuau</i>	<i>Tu me tues des centaines de fois</i>	Me matas cientos de veces	You kill me a hundred times
<i>Apu takuak nuin nishkanit</i>	<i>Mes os sans moelle</i>	Mis huesos sin médula	Marrow-less bones
<i>Tipatamuat</i>	<i>Deviennent une histoire</i>	Se convierten en una historia	Turn buried history
<i>Ka nikashkatakaniti</i>	<i>Qu'on enfouit</i>		
<i>Namaieu nin kashikat</i>	<i>Je suis sans aujourd'hui</i>	Soterrada	I am without today
<i>Namaieu nin uapaki</i>	<i>Je suis sans lendemain</i>	Estoy sin hoy	Without tomorrow
<i>Nin aum utakushit</i>	<i>C'est toujours hier que je suis</i>	Estoy sin mañana	Always yesterday I am
		Siempre ayer estoy	
<i>Kashtipishkau anite pemishinian</i>	<i>Dans l'obscurité de ma mort</i>	En la oscuridad de mi muerte	In the darkness of my death
<i>Nitanauakauati nitatshakush</i>	<i>J'ai enseveli mon âme</i>	He sepultado mi alma	I have entombed my soul
<i>Tshetshi mishkuakaniti</i>	<i>Pour qu'on la retrouve</i>	Para que alguien la encuentre	So somebody will find it

Bacon’s work as an adult has led her to return to her people as a translator-interpreter, listening and registering her ancestral language while gradually reestablishing personal ties to the Innu nation. In 2009, encouraged by Quebecer poet Laure Morali, she compiled her scattered texts and published them as *Bâtons à message. Tshissinuutshitakana*, with the publishing house Mémoire d’encrier. To her, this wasn’t about poetry. “Writing a poem had never occurred to me. The word ‘poetry’ was not a part of my vocabulary,” she has declared. Her quest was more about recovering the lost word: “Poetry allows us to revive the language of the *Nutshimit*, our land, and, through words, the sound of the drum beats on.” Writing poetry thus emerges as more than an individual act: it is a collective act of resistance and transmission. In other words:

<i>Quand une parole est offerte,</i>	<i>Menutakuaki aimun,</i>	Cuando una palabra se brinda,	A word offere
<i>elle ne meurt jamais.</i>	<i>apu nita nipumakak.</i>	nunca muere.	shall never die.
<i>Ceux qui viendront</i>	<i>Tshika petamuat</i>	Los que vengan	All who come
<i>l'entendront.</i>	<i>nikan tshe takushiniht</i>	la oirán.	will hear it.

(Bacon, *Bâtons à message. Tshissinuutshitakana*, 2009)

Bacon has published several books of poetry and essays over the decades, including *Uiesh. The anthology Quelque part* (2018) won the Quebec Booksellers’ Prize the year after it was published. Her most recent book, *Kau Minuat. Une fois de plus* (2023), is a serene reflection on aging, trees, time, and quietude:



Le dos courbé	Nuakaukunen	La espalda encorvada	Hunched back
Mes genoux de métal	Piuashpishkuna nitshikuna	Mis rodillas de metal	Metal knees
Ma canne fidèle à mes pas lents	Nishashkauteun nuitshikuan	Mi bastón fiel a mis pasos lentos	Cane faithful to my slow step
Améliore ma marche	Tshetshi minu-pimuteian	Mejora mi marcha	My gait improves
Retrouver ces arbres tordus	Kau ninituapamuat nimishtikumat	Volver a esos árboles torcidos	To return to those trees
Par le vent de la mer	Ka pimashkushiht	Por el viento del mar	Twisted by the ocean wind
Ils ont tissé mes racines	Akua-nutin	Tejieron mis raíces	They wove my roots
Aux couleurs d'enfants disparus	Tshissimataimu nitinniunnu	Con los colores de los niños desaparecidos	From the colors of children
	Miam auassa ka uniakaniht		Disappeared

Bacon's complete works, well-known beyond the borders of the Innu nation, have put Indigenous poetry in general and Innu poetry in particular under the limelight. In fact, her valuable contributions to literature earned the poet the Molson Prize in 2023, awarded by the Canada Council for the Arts. With tenderness and precision, the filmmaker Kim O'Bomsawin has portrayed the poet's trajectory in the documentary *Je m'appelle humain* (My name is human, 2020).

Joséphine Bacon's imposing figure is much like a tree hidden in a lush forest. The generational relaying of Innu literature has been fully safeguarded thanks to these women's talents, but also thanks to several male authors who are no less brilliant. We might name Michel Jean (1960-), Rita Mestokosho (1966-), Maya Cousineau-Mollen (1975-), Pierrot Ross-Tremblay (1977-), Melissa Mollen Dupuis (1978-), Marie-Andrée Gill (1986-), Naomi Fontaine (1987-), and Natasha Kanapé-Fontaine (1991-), who produce poetry, fiction, novels, essays, theater,

and epistolary work. These poets have contributed to anchoring the Innu language in the contemporary world. This is the case of the collective anthology *S'agripper aux fleurs* (To Cling to the Flowers, 2012), with poems by Shan Dak Puana, Louise Canapé, and Louve Mathieu. Their verses bring us close to the past and present realities of the Innu nation, interspersing them with the ancient Japanese poetic form of the haiku. Shan Dak Puana, for example, yields a sensory experience in the following verses:

*thé du Labrador
l'odeur de la toundra
dans ma tasse*

*minuepaku
minakuanka mushuat assi
anite niminakanit*

*té de Labrador
el olor de la tundra
en mi taza*

*Labrador tea
scent of tundra
in my cup*

Not everything is sweet and nostalgic, of course. The haiku by Louve Mathieu hearkens us back to the crude reality of child-abuse:

*lit d'enfant
s'agripper aux fleurs
du drap
avant la pénétration*

*auassiu-nipeun
ninushitshimin anite uapikuna ka
nukuaki uapuanit
eshku eka pitutepanait*

*cama infantil
aferrarse a las flores
de la sábana
antes de la penetración*

*child's bed
cling to the flowers
on the sheets
before penetration*

The poems by Pierrot Ross-Tremblay, meanwhile, anchor us in recurring topics within Innu poetry, but with a far more cryptic tone.

« *La grande émeute I* »

“El gran motín I”

“The Great Revolt I”



*L'œil épuré
Conçoit le ciel*

*El ojo depurado
Concibe el cielo*

*A clean eye
Conceives the heavens*

*L'espérance
Aspire l'âme
Au tourbillon*

*La esperanza
Aspira el alma
Al torbellino*

*Hope
Breathes in the soul
the storm*

L'esprit libéré

El espíritu liberado

Freed spirit



*Terre d'exaltation
Jungle bijou
Sahara de franchise
Le monde a fleuri
Écho du dedans
Nourrice des béatitudes
L'effondrement
Honore le règne du sourire*

*Tierra de exaltación
Jungla joya
Sahara de franqueza
El mundo ha florecido
Eco del adentro
Nodriz de las beatitudes
El colapso
Honra el reino de la sonrisa*

*Earth of exaltation
Jungle gem
Frank Sahara
The world has blossomed
Echo from within
Wetnurse of beatitudes
The collapse
praises the reign of smiles*



The dissemination of prolific Innu literature has been supported by many authors who aren't Innu but who have encouraged readers to approach this rich, ancestral culture. These authors include Véronique Audet, Serge Bouchard, Françoise Chicoine, Jean Désy, José Mailhot, Laure Morali, and Mathieu-Robert Sauvé, to name a few. The publishing house Mémoire d'encrier notably promotes a broad catalogue of poetry by members of Canada's Indigenous communities. In addition, anyone wishing to discover Innu texts in French first-hand may access the work of the cited authors at the Bibliothèque des Amériques,² after signing up for free at the Centre de la francophonie des Amériques.

Now, while the first step is to introduce Innu texts in both Innu-aimun and in French, the next step would be to make this corpus accessible to readers in different geographies. Once-imposed languages like French, English, and Spanish can serve a decolonizing purpose today, allowing a broader readership to see themselves in the poetic mirrors of Innu voices. There is still plenty of work ahead in this sense, even though the poetry of some of the above-mentioned authors has already been translated to other languages. For instance, *A tea in the tundra*, by Bacon, was published in an anthology translated by Donald Winkler in 2017, while *Mingan my village* (2014), a compilation of poetry by Innu children, is also available.

Among the scant translations of Innu literature to the Spanish, we may highlight the collective book led by María Leonor Sara, *Mujer tierra, mujer poema* (Woman Earth, woman poem, 2021), published in La Plata (Argentina) by the publishing house Malisia, with texts by Bacon, Kanapé-Fontaine, and Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau (the latter of whom is Cree). Likewise, the Canadian professor Sophie Lavoie has disseminated several Spanish versions of Innu poetry across diverse networks. Luis Martínez Andrade has translated poems by Pierrot Ross-Tremblay for the website *Círculo de poesía*. One may also enjoy six interviews with contemporary poets from Mexico and Canada — Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Maya Cousineau-Mollen, Shan Dak Puana, Louise Halfe, Nadia López García, and Irma Pineda — in Spanish, French, and English, on the YouTube channel of the Margaret Atwood, Alanis Obomsawin, and Gabrielle Roy Extraordinary Lectureship on Canadian Studies at UNAM.³ **MM**

Notes

¹ The author translated the poems from French to Spanish, and the translation from Spanish to English is by María Cristina Fernández Hall.

² <https://www.bibliothequedesameriques.com/>.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVdEa14MvhaYvYgiOvBosZ4a-ZJUYL-3H>.

