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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Calling (Out) Contemporary Settlers: Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth* and 'colonizer' as Trans-Media Indigenous Wonderwork"

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Split Tooth (2018) is the first published work by award-winning performer, recording artist, and Indigenous activist Tanya Tagaq (Inuit). Part prose, part poetry, part memoir, part fiction, *Split Tooth* reflects its author's Inuit heritage while refusing easy genre definition. Tagaq describes the work as a diary of ideas from her early childhood to *her* forties (*Split Tooth* – Tanya *Tagaq* 1:29). In that spirit, one reviewer has called the work Tagaq's "mythobiography" (Sterdan). I refer to it here simply as the "Text." Labels aside, the Text invites various readings. One of those is as a meditation on how Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to the other-than-human differ from the instrumentalist epistemologies of Western settlers in the High Arctic of what is now Canada.

In many ways, Tagaq's acclaimed 2022 album *Tongues* is *Split Tooth's* companion piece. Released four years after *Split Tooth*, *Tongues* takes portions of the

Text for its lyrics. More important, it pointedly contests the settler project in the Canadian Arctic. The music videos supporting *Tongues* animate Tagaq's decolonial message with striking images, creating a sound- and video-scape for Tagaq's ideas, many of which have been carried over from *Split Tooth*. While at least one scholar has connected aspects of *Split Tooth* to Tagaq's prior musical output (Preston), little if any scholarship exists linking *Split Tooth* and *Tongues*.

In this article, I examine the ways Tagaq's decolonial project manifests in both *Split Tooth* and *Tongues*, specifically how the music video for *Tongues*' track, "Colonizer" (the "Video") amplifies the Text's decolonial themes. One of the ways the Text advances Tagaq's project is by foregrounding other-than-human elements like land, water, ice, and the northern lights. For Tagaq, these elements are not inanimate objects lacking sentience and self, as settler logic would dictate. Instead, they are lively and agentive, a foundation of Inuit society and culture. The land and the northern lights in particular play key roles in the Text. Like the Text, the Video represents the land and the northern lights as lively and agentive. In depicting them this way, Tagaq invokes Indigenous knowledge and traditions that starkly contrast with settler programs bent on conquest, exploitation, and elimination of Indigenous spaces and cultures. In this, the Text and the Video are instances of what Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) calls Indigenous wonderworks.

Drawing on Justice's theories around Indigenous wonderworks, I argue that the Text and the Video speak to one another across forms of artistic expression. As a result, they become what I call a trans-media Indigenous wonderwork. Here, the "trans-" in "trans-media" gestures toward what Chadwick Allen (Chickasaw ancestry), in his important work on trans-Indigenous methodology, identifies as the ways Indigenous writers and artists often work in and across more than one artistic genre or form in advancing their creative and political projects ("Decolonizing Comparison" 385). Reading the Text and the Video as juxtaposed forms of artistic expression—in close proximity to one another both artistically and politically— shows how the Video's starkly

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decolonial music, images, and lyrics underscore and bolster the decolonial message of *Split Tooth*. The resulting trans-media Indigenous wonderwork pointedly indicts settler audiences for their complicity both in the history of settler colonialism in Canada's High Arctic and in the continuing effects of the colonial project in the contemporary settler state.

Indigenous Wonderworks

The Indigenous wonderwork as a genre traces its origins to Grace Dillon's (Anishinaabe) influential edited collection, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012). There, Dillon explores forms of Indigenous science fiction, collectively naming them "Indigenous futurism." According to Dillon, this genre challenges the boundaries of settler-colonial science fiction (3). It allows Indigenous artists to "discard[ ] the emotional and psychological baggage carried from [colonialism's] impact, and recover[ ] ancestral traditions in order to adapt to [the] post-Native Apocalypse world" (10). For Dillon, then, Indigenous futurism is a decolonial expressive form aimed at cultural recovery (10-11).

Dillon's theories, however, have not gone unchallenged. For instance, while acknowledging the importance of Dillon's work, Miriam Brown Spiers interrogates Dillon's choice to label texts that reflect Indigenous traditions and worldviews, particularly older Indigenous texts, as a form of "science fiction." By doing this, Spiers explains, Dillon risks "trivializing Native voices and communities, . . . reducing lived experiences to primitive superstitions," or to something "simply fantastical" (xvi). Spiers reasons that readers unfamiliar with Indigenous culture may misunderstand Indigenous futurism as "a fascinating but naïve interpretation of reality" that ultimately causes them to "dismiss and disregard Indigenous cultures" (xvi). For Spiers, such readings could end up reinforcing the same colonial models Dillon seeks to resist (xvi).

Daniel Heath Justice, on the other hand, sees Indigenous futurism as "a major

site of production, engagement, and analysis" (Justice, "Circle" 150). In his view, "some of the most vibrant interventions in the field are in these diverse speculative forms" (150). Justice expands on Dillon's project, particularly as it has to do with recovering Indigenous traditions through decolonization. As a way of foregrounding this, he incorporates Dillon's focus on "'Native conditions in Native-centered worlds'" (Justice, "Indigenous Wonderworks"). In this way, he helps expand thinking about Indigenous cultural production, underscoring how it represents ways of living in the world that differ from those prescribed by settler culture (*Why Indigenous Literatures* 155). This move reduces the risk settler readers might misunderstand Indigenous texts as myth or fairy tale.

Although the Indigenous wonderwork is related to genres like speculative fiction, imaginative literature, and fantasy, it departs from them in important ways. Those genres, Justice explains, rest on Western, dualistic presumptions of what is real and what is only imagined. Moreover, they are "deeply entangled in settler-colonial logics of dead matter, monolithic reality, and rationalist supremacy" ("Indigenous Wonderworks"). Western forms of "realism" serve Indigenous authors no better, as they require the artist to work within "a very limited and often pessimistic range" of representational strategies ("Indigenous Wonderworks"). Unlike those Western fictive genres, the Indigenous wonderwork recognizes and describes the many ways Indigenous authors create worlds attuned to their peoples' traditions and ways of knowing. These forms of knowledge differ, often radically, from Western epistemologies. This is due, in part, to the fact the Indigenous wonderwork arises from and reflects the lands, histories, and experiences of Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing and relating to the world around them. The wonderwork deploys these ways of knowing for "Indigenous, decolonial purposes" ("Indigenous Wonderworks"). It makes "space for meaningful engagements and encounters [that are] dismissed by colonial authorities" but that, nonetheless, are crucial for recovering Indigenous culture ("Indigenous Wonderworks").

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At least one other scholar has read *Split Tooth* as an Indigenous wonderwork. Abdenour Bouich (Amazigh/Berber) looks to Justice when analyzing what might appear to settler readers as fantastical elements of the Text. Like Bouich, I read the Text as an Indigenous wonderwork. Unlike Bouich, however, I analyze *Split Tooth* and the Video as a hybrid article of cultural production, as a single, trans-media Indigenous wonderwork. This novel way of interpreting the projects of Indigenous artists like Tagaq suggests how different, yet complementary, forms of media may combine to amplify the message of their makers' larger decolonial projects.

Split Tooth – The Other-Than-Human as Family

In *Split Tooth*, Tagaq depicts the agentive force and the liveliness—the ensouled nature—of other-than-human elements like land, water, ice, and the northern lights. One could argue that in doing this Tagaq simply crafts symbols and metaphors from inanimate objects, the standard fare of literary representation. Or one could argue *Split Tooth* is a work of fantasy, magical realism, or the like. Readings like these, however, reduce Tagaq's engagement with the other-than-human to little more than fiction in the Western tradition. They privilege Enlightenment notions of the "rational" human, a being distinct from flora, fauna, and the elements of the planet. They disregard Indigenous understandings of an other-than-human realm that acts with agency, that is more than merely symbols or metaphors, or fantasy or science fiction. Such readings are inadequate to understand Tagaq's project and those like it. Instead, *Split Tooth* is best understood as an Indigenous wonderwork.

My reading of the Text as wonderwork considers how Tagaq engages two elements of the other-than-human: the northern lights, Arqsarniq in Inuktitut, and the land of the Inuit, located in what is now the territory of Nunavut in Canada's High Arctic. I trace the ways Tagaq depicts the northern lights and the land as lively, agentive members of Inuit society. This is central to understanding the Text as Indigenous

wonderwork. Through the lens of the wonderwork, we see Tagaq resist settler culture by reclaiming and deploying Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to the other-than-human. In this way, Tagaq challenges the rationalist Western logic underlying settler colonialism, past and present.

Split Tooth's narrator has many encounters with the northern lights, but I focus on one in particular: it comes at the end of a school day in the dark Arctic winter, when the narrator avoids her parents' drunken party by walking out onto the sea ice. Lying on the ice and breathing the frozen air, the narrator beckons to the northern lights, calling them down from the sky: "Arqsarniq. I sing for you," she intones. "Humming shakily at first, thin tendrils of sound. The trepidation dissolves and a throbbing vibratory expulsion of sound emerges" (55). The lights respond, treating the narrator to a dazzling auditory-visual display. They descend near her and join her song with a "high-pitched ringing mixed with the crackling snap of electricity" (56). Communing with the Lights, the narrator sees into the future, viewing her unborn children. She looks into the past, "weep[ing] at the majesty of [her] ancestors," but upon awakening, she is shaken and realizes she had been having a "dangerous dream" (57). At that, she leaves the ice, running home to the "now comforting" sounds of Johnny Cash playing loudly at her parent's party (57).

The narrator's encounter with the Northern Lights shows the imaginative reorientation central to the Indigenous wonderwork. To begin, it is important to note a matter of grammar: Tagaq capitalizes the common noun "northern lights," so it appears as "Northern Lights." This strategy "assert[s] the relationship that the Inuit have with life, corporeality, and spirituality" (Bouich 94-95). Or as Justice explains, converting common nouns to proper nouns transforms their referents from objects conceived as "exploitable commodities" into "subject[s] with agency" (*Indigenous Literatures*, 6).[1] With this grammatical move, the Text enters the realm of the wonderwork, where both the narrator and the Northern Lights have agency. They communicate in a way that melds human with other-than-human: the sound of the narrator's human voice calling

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out and the Lights responding, visually and auditorily. This merger prompts the narrator's vision of ancestors and descendants. It evokes what Kyle P. Whyte describes as "spiraling time" (229). This way of conceiving time, Whyte explains, aims to capture Indigenous understandings that humans "liv[e] alongside future and past relatives simultaneously" (229). Here, in a spiraling time that shows the generational simultaneity Whyte describes, Tagaq reclaims Inuit culture while representing the Lights themselves as a portal to the narrator's family.

All of Tagaq's moves in this scene—the narrator's dream state, call-and-response dialogue, communion and merger between narrator and Lights, visions of ancestors and descendants witnessed in spiraling time—evoke the ceremony, ritual, and dream that are key elements of Indigenous wonderworks (Justice, *Indigenous Literatures* 152). The fact Tagaq locates the narrator's encounter with the Northern Lights within a dream state is crucial. The dream state, Justice explains, is an important space in Indigenous culture. It rejects "certainty over what is real and unreal, true and false, legitimate and delusional" (153). Binary conclusions like these are for the waking world of Western rationalism. The dream and the wonderwork, instead, privilege the "uncertainty, curiosity, and humility" that reside in what Indigenous peoples often call the "Great Mystery" (153).

Thus far, Tagaq's moves are clearly non-Western. The narrator's communion with the Northern Lights challenges Western rationality, particularly the long-imagined gulf between human and other-than-human. Spiraling time unsettles Western notions of strict linear temporality. The narrator understands these things: she knows her engagement with the Northern Lights, though occurring in a dream state, is "dangerous" (57) for its decolonial potential. It kindles, or re-ignites, traditional Indigenous ways of relating to the natural world as family. It has the potential to unsettle her youthful understanding of the contemporary, capitalist society in which she moves.

If carried forward into adulthood or activism, such thinking can unsettle colonial logic on larger scales. Settler states know this. That is why they have worked intently to erase Indigenous knowledge, if not entire Indigenous civilizations. Near the end of this scene Tagaq shows the narrator's Indigenous ways of knowing coming up against the epistemologies of the settler world she inhabits. The narrator flees the site of her dream, running from the ice to her parents' home where she meets the "comforting thumping of Johnny Cash's bass" (57). The presence of Johnny Cash is telling. It reminds the reader that even in spaces of Indigenous wonder, settler logic—here in the figure of an American country and western music icon—asserts itself as a normative space of "comfort" for the Indigenous person.

Like the narrator's encounters with the Northern Lights, the Text describes her relationship with the Land of the Inuit.[2] With these scenes, Tagaq encourages the reader to see Indigenous ways of knowing and being with the Land as alternatives to the binary, instrumentalist modes of settler Land use strategies. I limit my reading to one example that underscores the protective and regenerative power Land holds for Inuit peoples. In it, the narrator speculates at length about the disposition of body and spirit after death:

> What happens to the energy once it leaves our body? Does it leave us or does it start vibrating at an unknown frequency? Does it cast itself into the wind and leave our vessels lonely? Do our spirits travel with the wind? Do our spirits retain our value and ascend into the Knowing or are we demoted with our bodies decay? Are we as worthy while we rot? How many layers of consciousness are there? Are we still giving? Is being inanimate really a lesser state? (131)

Ultimately, the narrator concludes the place to look for this knowledge is to the Land, "Land always answers these questions for me," she explains. "Land protects and owns me. Land feeds me. My father and mother are the Land. My future children are the Land. You are the Land" (132).

As with the scene of the Northern Lights, Tagaq's moves here are decidedly non-

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Western. By having the narrator turn to the Land as family, Tagaq rejects Western, settler binaries like "reality" and "fantasy," or "truth" and "falsehood." She encourages the reader, instead, to see Inuit ways of knowing and ways of being in the world. She describes the relationship between Land and the narrator in terms of human generations and the care they give to and receive from one another. As elder, the Land answers the narrator's questions, giving guidance born of prior generations' lived experiences. As father and mother, the Land "protects and owns" the narrator. It "feeds" her, giving her the shelter and the care parents and family provide children and relatives. As "children," the Land looks to her and other human relatives for loving attention and care. This scene opposes rationalist, Euro-normative conceptions of the other-than-human. It reclaims Inuit cultural forms and ways of knowing as the proper way to relate to the Land, and to the other-than-human more generally.

Tagaq not only represents Land as a relative. She once again shows family existing in non-linear, "spiraling time." She shows how the Land binds the narrator to her family, her ancestors, her father and mother, her unborn children, all at once. The narrator's links to the Land cause her to exist alongside multiple generations of living, dead, and unborn relatives while also living alongside the Land as immediate, ensouled family. What's more, we, the readers, become part of this family. "You are the Land," Tagaq writes to us. With this move into and out of the second person, Tagaq draws the reader into the spiraling generational cycle of human and other-than-human relations. She reminds us that we, the readers, are directly related, as family, to the other-than-human realm settler logic so often imagines as distinct other.

These ways of understanding and relating to the Land reject Western paradigms of property ownership and Land use grounded on rationalist, instrumentalist logic. Western logic views Land as private property, as inanimate and distinct from humankind, as something to be owned and used. In this way Land becomes an

"exploitable commodity" (Justice, *Indigenous Literatures* 6), the highest and best use of which is to be enclosed, improved, and developed. As Amitav Ghosh writes, this epistemological violence of European colonialism led to "the emergence of a new economy based on extracting resources from a desacralized, inanimate Earth" (38). It supported ways of thinking that bred understandings of the other-than-human as "'brute' and 'stupid' and hence deserving of conquest" (36). This thinking allowed colonizers to treat Land merely as a source of wealth and profit (36). Tagaq's narrator rejects these paradigms. Instead, she invokes Inuit understandings of a Land that guides, protects, feeds, and reproduces her and her people. These are not relations of extraction or exploitation. They are relations of respect, kinship, and family.

The Indigenous Land relations Tagaq describes frustrate the efforts of colonizers, settlers, and corporations to control Land.[3] As Patrick Wolfe explains, these efforts reflect the nature of settler colonialism as "an inclusive, land-centered project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies . . . with a view to eliminating Indigenous societies" ("Settler Colonialism" 393). Settler expansion depends on a range of eliminatory strategies. For instance, it seeks not only to physically alienate Indigenous peoples from their Lands. It also seeks to reprogram the ways they conceive of and relate to the Land. "[O]ne central way of doing this," Justice and O'Brien write, "was by attacking the relationships that tied people to the land" (xv). Tagaq understands this history of alienation and reprogramming. She opposes it by representing the "specific relationship[ ]" (Justice, *Indigenous Literatures* 154) between the narrator and the Land of the High Arctic, a relationship with its own deep history in Inuit traditions, cosmologies, and knowledge. In doing this, she "ground[s the] wonder" (154) embodied in *Split Tooth* in the lived realities of the narrator and the Inuit people and, specifically, their ways of knowing and relating to the Land . With each of these moves, she makes an Indigenous wonderwork.

By depicting the Northern Lights and the Land as vital, with life and agency, as the narrator's family, Tagaq affirms Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to the

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other-than-human. At the same time, she implicitly contests both the legacy and the contemporary effects of settler colonialism in the High Arctic. She invokes "wonder" as an alternative to the logic of alienation and enclosure underlying settler colonial relations to the Land. In doing so, she fashions an Indigenous wonderwork. Although she implies the culpability of readers in the continuing settler project, and invites them to reflect on their complicity, Tagaq never makes that link express. In the music and the videos of the album *Tongues*, however, this connection becomes explicit.

Tongues, "Colonizer," and Contemporary Settler Complicity

With the album *Tongues*, Tagaq has much to say about the Canadian settler state, particularly the troubled history of its residential school system. In that regard, one reviewer muses "Pope [Francis] may have said he's sorry [for the involvement of the Catholic church in the Canadian residential school system], but *Tongues* is a furious assertion of debts yet to be paid" (Decter 29). Tongues not only contests the legacies of residential schools; it challenges ongoing settler processes in Canada, like occupation of Indigenous lands and Indigenous language loss. As popular music scholar Alexa Woloshyn points out, Tagaq's musical decoloniality is an effort to enact a "deliberate strategy of cultural and political self-determination" for Inuit peoples (4). Consistent with that, Woloshyn continues, Tagaq refuses "to merely affirm the settler fantasy or reinforce one-dimensional stereotypes of Inuit" (10). Rather, as *Tongues* illustrates, Tagaq's work is nuanced and multi-dimensional, exploring varied historical and contemporary forms of colonial oppression and a range of Indigenous responses to them.

This section analyzes the video for the track "Colonizer" as an Indigenous wonderwork that pointedly attacks the Canadian residential school system and the colonial logic underpinning it. The Video does this by using three distinct semiotic modes: aural (musical), visual (video), and textual (lyrics). Aurally, the track begins as a

distorted, repetitive, three note synthesizer riff atop propulsive percussion, all at a brisk tempo of 150 beats per minute. The time signature, alternating between measures of 5/8 and 3/8 time, accents unexpected beats—not the backbeat of pop and rock, the syncopated beats of jazz, or the downbeat of Western classical forms. Rather, the propulsive, off-kilter cadence results in something like a lopsided waltz, subtly mocking that staid European form of composition.

The structural elements of tempo and time signature establish an agitated, uneasy mood. Layered onto these elements is a foreboding soundscape made up of synthesizers and Tagaq's voice. The synthesizers are a crucial part of the track's aural effects. As one reviewer writes, their constant presence lends the album "a buzzing undercurrent of electronics that turn analog performance into inventive digital music" (Pearce). On "Colonizer" the opening synthesizer riff continues for the track's duration, its notes descending three steps then returning to the starting point every other measure. The synthesizers sizzle and hum, dissolving over and over with the falling the three-note riff into what sounds like the static of a mis-tuned radio dial, adding to the track's sense of foreboding.

Tagaq enters early on, vocalizing alongside the synthesizers in a form of throat singing called katajjaq in the Inuit language Inuktitut. Katajjaq is an ancient form of vocal game traditionally played between pairs of Inuit women while men were away on a hunt. Its purpose is "to influence the spirits of animals to surrender their lives, [by] imitating surrounding environmental sounds (e.g., breaking ice, animal grunts)" (Stevance 50). Banned for years by the Canadian settler state, in recent times katajjaq has become an important element of Inuit cultural resurgence. Though a skilled practitioner of katajjaq, Tagaq has never observed its rules strictly (Woloshyn 4). Instead, she learned katajjaq alone, and performs it without the traditional second singer. Moreover, whereas katajjaq is traditionally performed a cappella, without musical accompaniment, Tagaq most often performs with backing musicians, using her katajjaq voice much like a musical instrument in exploring a broad spectrum of sounds.

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By ignoring katajjaq's formal rules while retaining its decidedly non-Western character, Tagaq makes novel Indigenous art. As Chadwick Allen explains in a different context, because musical forms like Tagaq's "use . . . recognizably customary sound elements, patterns, and techniques" they exhibit "'aural empathy' with customary practice" (154). Given its aural empathy with traditional Inuit katajjaq, Tagaq's form of katajjaq can be seen as "'trans-customary' work that is neither 'hybrid' nor 'caught between' traditional and modern forms" (153). Rather, it is its own distinct form of Indigenous expression. In "Colonizer," Tagaq uses it to convey her own distinct, decolonial Indigenous message.

Tagaq's trans-customary katajjaq is at the center of "Colonizer's" soundscape. Throughout the track, Tagaq alternates between expressive breath sounds in a high register and tones in a much lower, more guttural register. As a matter of mechanics, Tagaq explains, these alternating sounds are "'a conglomeration between flapping your epiglottis and using your nasal cavities with the deep growling sound. You can either make deep sounds going in and out or higher sounds going in and out, or any combination. It's like sculpting, but with sound'" (Dickie). Just as Tagaq alternates between sounds in high and low registers, she likewise alternates between non-linguistic and linguistic sounds. Non-linguistically, Tagaq often vocalizes in "Colonizer" with grunts and growls. This form of vocalization, music scholar Sophie Stevance posits, "violates Western musical sound conventions through [making] 'primitive sounds'" (54). As a result, Tagaq's "markedly rough sounding throat singing . . . could be deemed ugly and strange or even disturbing to the untrained ear" (54). Tagaq's first linguistic utterance in the track is the word "colonizer." She growls and snarls this one word repeatedly in the deep lower register of katajjaq. In doing this, she invests the word with significance as the track's title and as the Video's object of attack. At the same time, she defamiliarizes it. Using the foreboding timbre of the grating, grinding lower

katajjaq register to unnerve those listening with "untrained ear[s]" (Stevance 54), Tagaq holds the word up for inspection. Spoken in the colonizer's language but voiced in menacing katajjaq, she subverts and Indigenizes it, loosening it from its mooring in English and turning it to decolonial ends.

Working in tandem with its aural elements, the Video's visual elements are critical in conveying its decolonial message. As in *Split Tooth*, the Video deploys images of the Arctic Land and the Northern Lights as symbols of anticolonial resistance to the "logic of [Indigenous] elimination" (Justice and O'Brien xviii) at the heart of the settler project. It opens with computer-generated aerial images of sea ice and tundra, presumably the same Land Tagaq writes of in *Split Tooth*. Though considered terra nullius by the settler state, and thus subject to settler Land claims, this Land was never vacant. Rather, it is home to Indigenous peoples and to the other-than-human elements on which they have depended since time immemorial.

The images of Land soon cut to a view of three human figures sculpted from ice. One is a man wearing vestments and holding a cross. Another is a woman dressed in simple clothing. Between them on a pedestal stands a third figure, that of a man in formal clothing and a cape in the style of the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The figure holds a roll of official-looking papers in its right hand while a sword hangs at its left hip. The first two ice figures—a priest and a nun—suggest the Catholic church that staffed and ran the residential schools. The third figure is especially suggestive. In fact, this figure is the image of a famous statue of Canada's first prime minister, John A. MacDonald.[4] "For many Indigenous peoples, MacDonald was the chief architect of the residential schools who engineered their cultural genocide" (Stanley 89). In the context of the Video, the roll of papers in MacDonald's hand hints at treaties and laws, the authority by which the Canadian government consigned Indigenous children to residential schools and dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their Lands and cultures. The sword at his hip can be read here as a reminder that if the law failed, the government would use violence to affect its intent. These three figures appear

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throughout the Video from a variety of angles, but always atop the hill overlooking the Land. This elevated position suggests the colonial gaze and the settler's effort to project power over the Land and its people.

The next series of images alludes to the differences between Indigenous and settler understandings of Land relations. For almost an entire minute the Video shows overhead images of Arctic Land. They initially scroll past slowly, depicting uninhabited Land, lakes, and rivers. As the images gain speed, the Land abruptly transitions into segmented parcels. This jarring shift from undisturbed, open Land to segmented lots suggests parcelization and enclosure. Divided into rectangles and squares, the Land is bounded. Boundaries like these, and the corresponding right to exclude others, define Western regimes of private property. As Justice and O'Brien explain, "the privatization (and subsequent alienation) of collectively held Indigenous territories has been—and continues to be—a fundamental mechanism of settler colonial domination and displacement across Indigenous homelands on a global scale" (xii). The Video suggests these "dispossessive processes" (xi), as the tundra symbolically transforms from collective Indigenous Land to segmented private property.

The Northern Lights as a decolonial force appear at the 1:40 mark, throbbing against a starry sky. As the perspective shifts downward, the Lights seem to descend onto a tower topped with a cross. The structure on which the tower sits is in flames. While the Northern Lights hover over the burning building, the field of vision pans across a sign reading "Thunderchild Indian Residential School – St. Henri – Delmas." This image refers to an actual residential school that operated from 1901 to 1948 outside what was to become Delmas, Saskatchewan, near the Thunderchild Reserve (Thunderchild). It explicitly evokes the residential schools that sought to destroy Indigenous social and cultural systems. In what perhaps was an instance of decolonial struggle in its own day, the Thunderchild school was destroyed by a fire reportedly set

by four Indigenous students (Thunderchild). The Video suggests this event, underscoring Tagaq's decolonial message by highlighting historical Indigenous resistance to settler oppression. The presence of the Northern Lights at the burning school, too, is significant. In *Split Tooth*, Tagaq shows how the Lights hold deep meaning for Indigenous peoples of the High Arctic. There, they represent ancestors and descendants and thus the past and the future of the Inuit people. Here, the Lights underscore past Indigenous resistance to settler forces and presage ongoing resistance to contemporary settler projects. They suggest that the Indigenous ancestors and their resistance at the residential school exist together in spiraling time with contemporary Indigenous descendants.

After leaving the burning residential school, the Video returns to fast-moving overhead images of segmented Land. The images blur as they gain speed. Tagaq enters here with lyrics. As discussed above, she repeats the word "Colonizer" in the guttural lower register of her trans-customary katajjaq (2:18) before shifting to a taunting, sing-song repetition of "Oh, you're guilty" (2:32). As the Video nears its denouement, the Northern Lights appear to descend onto the head of the ice figure of MacDonald. Gazing imperiously—or wistfully—at the Land, the figure begins to melt as the Lights hover over it and Tagaq gutturally repeats the lyric "Colonizer" (2:48). At the 3:04 mark, Tagaq's lyrics shift into direct address: "You colonizer." The timbre of her voice changes from deep katajjaq to repeated shouts of the same words, ending in a high, echoing scream that fades into the track's ever-present, buzzing synthesizers. The Artic sun breaks the horizon. All three ice figures melt as Tagaq sings, liltingly, tauntingly, "Oh, you're guilty" (3:32). The melting hastens until these symbols of settler state and church disappear completely. Returning to liquid form, the figures run downhill through crevices in the rocky Land, where they join a clear body of water shimmering over a bed of rock (4:02 – 4:20). With that, the Video ends.

The Video's three semiotic modes—aural, visual, and textual—are deeply Indigenous and decolonial. Aurally, Tagaq privileges Indigenous forms of vocalization

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over vocal conventions of Western music to tell a story both of past settler violence and of the complicity of her settler audience in the continuing settler project. Moreover, in the distinctly contemporary way Tagaq arranges, performs, and produces her trans-customary katajjaq, she asserts the contemporary relevance of Indigenous arts like her own while repudiating settler efforts to consign Indigenous peoples to the past, an effort that is central to the settler logic of elimination. Tagaq's music and soundscapes not only honor Inuit customs. They also point toward Indigenous survivance and futurity while embodying her own contemporary decolonial agenda. As one reviewer has commented, the soundscape Tagaq creates on *Tongues*, centering trans-customary katajjaq, is "what the process of decolonization can sound like in practice" (Przybylski).

Visually, beginning with overhead images of unsegmented tundra that transitions into divided parcels, the Video suggests the gulf between settler and Indigenous understandings of Land. The settler state sees Land as empty space calling out to be enclosed and improved as private property or developed for resource extraction. Indigenous peoples, on the other hand, view Land as collective, as family, as directly participating in, even defining, their culture. As the ice figures melt—including the figure meant to suggest the architect of Canada's residential school system–the Land receives their liquid forms and returns them to the Arctic sea. With this move, the Land symbolically collects then disposes of the settler project and its violent processes like the residential school system. This return to the elements connotes the impermanence of a Western culture that imposes itself on Indigenous life-worlds that have existed on and with the Land and the other-than-human for millennia; it points to the survivance of Indigenous peoples and cultures. With their presence at the burning residential school and at the scene of the melting ice figures, the Northern Lights likewise symbolize settler culture's impermanence: they affirm the

power of both other-than-human and of Indigenous culture, all while resisting colonial ideologies.

With respect to the Video's lyrics, Tagaq has explained how she fashioned the track with the express intent of calling out settler audiences for their complicity in the settler project. Speaking about the difficulty of conveying the truths of Indigenous existence in Canada to settler audiences, Tagaq explains: "There is no winning. [With 'Colonizer'] I thought fuck it, might as well just clobber them over the head with it because they're either not going to hear you or dismiss you. I would rather be dismissed as someone angry than be dismissed as someone kissing their ass, you know" (Cuthand). Elsewhere, she has stated about "Colonizer" that she refused to let the settler audience "wear blinders anymore. I'm just going to rip those off for you because it's better to see than to have blinders on. So that's why 'Colonizer' came out the way it did. Everybody is guilty and everybody has to take responsibility to repair the damages so that we can live" (Krewen). For Tagaq, settler culpability is clear. She knows that at the same time settler viewers consume her "powerful sonic messages" (Woloshyn 11) of decolonialism, they dwell on Indigenous Land and live off the fruits of a colonized continent. Her lyrics confront this reality head-on.

With its soundscape, its images, and its simple but strident lyrics, the Video deals in the mystery and the wonder so vital to the Indigenous wonderwork. It rejects the "rationalist supremacy" of settler logic and its detachment from the natural world (Justice, *Indigenous Literatures* 152). It affirms Indigenous ways of knowing as something "*other* and *otherwise* . . . outside the bounds of the everyday and mundane" (153, italics in original). Like the Text, the Video deploys the Land and the Northern Lights as lively, agentive elements of the other-than-human. In this alone, it is an Indigenous wonderwork. But it goes further than the Text, depicting the Land and the Lights as expressly decolonial. Unlike the narrative of Split Tooth, the Video pointedly indicts settler audiences and their complicity in settler projects, past and present.

Split Tooth and "Colonizer"– A Trans-Media Indigenous Wonderwork

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Pp. 26-52
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The Land of the Inuit and the Northern Lights are at the core of the ways of knowing Tagaq represents in *Split Tooth* and the decoloniality she advocates in the Video. Looking closely, one can see these other-than-human elements cross boundaries from *Split Tooth* to the Video in ways that reinforce the decolonial message of the Text. Following Chadwick Allen, one way of bringing this trans-media conversation into the light is by purposefully juxtaposing the Text and the Video. Etymologically, the term "juxtapose" combines the Latin juxta, or "close together," with the French poser, or "to place" (Allen *Trans-Indigenous*, xvii-xviii). Allen looks to this etymology in describing what he calls "Indigenous juxtapositions"—those that "place diverse [Indigenous] texts close together across genre and media, aesthetic systems and worldviews, technologies and practices" (xviii). As theorized by Allen, trans-Indigenous methodology involves juxtaposing texts by different makers from distinct Indigenous traditions. That methodology does not strictly apply here, where I read two texts made by a single artist. Nevertheless, reading the Text and the Video as forms of Indigenous artistic expression placed close together helps show how they function as a single, trans-media Indigenous wonderwork. Something new and exciting happens when, as Allen's work suggests, one takes the Text and its Indigenous ways of knowing and juxtaposes it with the blunt decoloniality of the Video.

The fact the Text and the Video speak to one another across media should come as no surprise. In addition to their underlying thematic parallels, Tagaq took many of the Text's poems as *Tongues*' lyrics.[5] Moreover, both works are part of Tagaq's larger creative and political project. This is evident in the ways each of them represents the Northern Lights and the Land as family that acts with and on behalf of human relatives. For instance, in the way the Northern Lights bridge generations of family—dead, living, and unborn—they remind *Split Tooth*'s narrator of her heritage and show her the future of her people. They play similar roles in the Video, where they represent Indigenous

pasts and futures, ancestors and descendants overseeing the destruction of the residential school. As symbols of past and future Indigenous resistance, they preside over the destruction of the ice figures that represent settler authority. The Lights watch as the figures melt, return to the Land, and flow into the Arctic waters, where they are diluted into insignificance.

Like the Northern Lights, Land resonates across media. In *Split Tooth*, Tagaq challenges settler logics of enclosure and improvement by depicting Land not as private property but as family. In declining to lay claim to Land, *Split Tooth*'s narrator refutes settler logics. Consistent with Indigenous ways of knowing, she makes clear the Land owns her. In this way, Tagaq builds a community of human narrator and Land, one based on reciprocal duty and respect. She braids the Land into the narrator's family group, both human and other-than-human. Land is not a commodity, is not something to be seized or enclosed or developed or sold. Rather, for the Inuit narrator, the Land is living, agentive, and familial. These themes recur in the Video. There, the images of Land changing from open tundra to bounded parcels invoke the allocation regimes and enclosures that typify settler colonialism. This is Land as commodity, not as family. By the Video's end, however, the Land sheds colonial encroachments. No longer bounded and segmented, it receives the dissipated ice figures and channels them, as water, into the Arctic sea. As protector of its Indigenous family, it routes these artifacts of the settler project through and across itself, away from Indigenous spaces, just as it ultimately will reclaim all humans and their systems, institutions, and artifacts.

Made evident by the "focused juxtapositions of . . . distinct Indigenous texts" (Allen *Trans-Indigenous*, xvii), this trans-media conversation sees the Video bolster *Split Tooth*'s rich decolonial allusion. For instance, after her powerful communion with the Northern Lights, the narrator flees the ice and her "dangerous dream" to return to the safety of the party and the "comforting thumping of Johnny Cash's bass" (57). The reference to Johnny Cash gestures toward settler culture as a normative force. As a form of decolonial protest, this allusion is complex, subtle. Similarly, when the narrator

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1195
Pp. 26-52
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

declares the Land "owns" her, she alludes to the long, conflicted history of Indigenous and settler understandings of Land use. Read with historical understanding, the allusion rebuts settler notions of Land and property ownership. Lacking that historical context, however, the allusion's subtlety risks obscuring its message.

Split Tooth's allusions, though artful, might be less helpful for Tagaq's decolonial program than a more direct attack. This is especially true to the extent Tagaq seeks to inculpate the Text's readers in the projects of their contemporary settler nations by reminding them that—regardless of their origins— they, too, are direct beneficiaries of the settler project; that settler invasion is not an historical fait accompli but, rather, a structure that continues to advantage them daily in direct and tangible ways (Wolfe 249). Here is where the Video, placed close together—juxtaposed—with the Text becomes the Text's partner, working across media to reinforce and supplement *Split Tooth*'s decolonial message. Like *Split Tooth*, the Video holds up the Land and the Northern Lights as vital members of Inuit culture and family. More clearly than the Text, however, the Video challenges Euro-normative rationality by showing the Land and the Lights as other-than-human beings with agency to oppose colonial forces directly. The Video's visual medium makes these moves more overtly than does the Text. The images of Land segmented then finally channeling the melted ice figures into a shimmering body of water are forceful. The same is true of the images of the Northern Lights presiding over the burning residential school and the melting colonial icons, including none less than the architect of Canada's residential school system.

Though powerful, the Video's images of the Land and the Northern Lights do not work alone. Tagaq's lyrics pointedly inculpate the settler. The six words— "Colonizer," "Oh, you're guilty," "You colonizer"— declare not only that the song targets settler colonialism as a historical project that sought to clear entire continents of Indigenous inhabitants so settlers and their descendants could flourish. The lyrics also

name the audience, regardless of their opinions about their own complicity, as participating in an ongoing coloniality. As white Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe explains: "in a structural sense, in terms of the history that has put me where I am and Indigenous people where they are, my individual consciousness, my personal attitude has got nothing to do with this. I am a beneficiary and a legatee of the dispossession and continuing elimination of Aboriginal people in Australia. As such, whatever my personal consciousness, I am a settler" (Interview 237). Through its "logic of elimination," Wolfe teaches, the settler project is a continuing process that operates to this day in the settler state (249). By using traditional Inuit forms of katajjaq in a non-traditional way—coupling pointed English lyrics with Indigenous sounds—Tagaq directly confronts residents of settler states with a contemporary Indigenous cultural form that names their complicity in six short words. In the Text, she leaves the reader to infer his or her complicity. The Video speaks that fact loudly, bolstering the Text's muted message. In doing so, it places settler audiences on notice they have been charged as participants in the settler project.

Juxtaposing the Text and the Video—placing them close together and reading them carefully near to one another—shows them conversing across boundaries of artistic expression. They bind themselves to one another as a trans-media Indigenous wonderwork in the way other-than-human elements function similarly in both works: as family with agency to act on behalf of human relatives; as representatives of Inuit histories and futures; as symbols of Indigenous resistance. Joined with the Text, the Video amplifies the message of *Split Tooth* with sound, images, and lyrics. The lyrics in particular highlight the culpability of the contemporary settler. Even more than the Text, the Video's simple, pointed lyrics stress how contemporary settlers are complicit in the colonial project. Taken together as a trans-media Indigenous wonderwork, the Video amplifies *Split Tooth*'s subtle, implicit message of audience involvement in and responsibility for ongoing settler colonialism.

Conclusion

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
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Pp. 26-52
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

As Indigenous wonderwork, *Split Tooth* is decolonial at its core. Despite this, it does not directly implicate the settler reader in the contemporary settler project. Instead, it tells stories of Indigenous relations with the other-than-human from which the reader may infer his or her culpability. For an author with a decolonial project like Tagaq's, however, this strategy risks uncertain ends. Settler populations are adept at sidestepping or ignoring their own culpability, in what Tuck and Yang call "settler moves to innocence" (10). Given this, the Text's allusion and metaphor may be insufficient to prompt audience self-reflection.

Juxtaposed—placed close together—with *Split Tooth*, the Video amplifies the Text's muted message of audience complicity. Its lyrics address the audience directly, in the second person. "*You* colonizer," Tagaq names them (italics added). "*You're* guilty," she tells them (italics added). Settler colonialism, she shouts, is not past. It exists today. It is happening now, and you—audience—are guilty. If you reap the benefits of Indigenous Lands, she declares, you are a settler just as those who first dispossessed Indigenous peoples of Lands and cultures and removed Indigenous children from families for forced assimilation in church-staffed residential schools in Canada and elsewhere. The Video's direct address resonates with the notes Tagaq strikes in the Text, of Land and Lights as family, as Indigenous pasts and futures, as symbols of Indigenous resistance. But the Video's lyrics, coupled with its unsettling soundscape and decolonial images of Land and Lights, lays blame squarely on the settler audience.

Juxtaposed with *Split Tooth*, the lesson of the Video crosses media to the Text. There, it magnifies the Text's implicit message of settler complicity. It amplifies *Split Tooth*'s allusion and metaphor with soundscapes and images and visceral shouts of blame. This is an example of how the trans-media Indigenous wonderwork can function: creating distinct forms of cultural production grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and causing them to amplify one another's decolonial messages. With this

hybrid form, the Indigenous artist heightens the urgency of her decolonial message. And, perhaps, the audience comes that much closer to acknowledging its culpability in the ongoing colonialism of their own settler state.

Notes

[1] This essay will follow Tagaq's convention of capitalization throughout.
[2] Following Tagaq's convention, I will capitalize Land as a proper noun throughout.
[3] The territory of Nunavut, where *Split Tooth* is set, reflects these entangled histories. Inhabited by Indigenous peoples for millennia, the region that would become Nunavut saw European contact in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the coming of the Hudson's Bay Company ("HBC") and its fur traders. A quasi-colonial "company state," with hybrid commercial and sovereign roles, the HBC was chartered by the English government in 1670 (Phillips and Sharman 125). Two centuries later, the region came under the control of the Canadian settler state when in 1869 the HBC transferred its claims to the region to the Government of Canada (126). After extensive Land claims negotiations between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government, Nunavut was created as a territory for independent Inuit government in 1999. Both before and after that date, the settler project has continued in the region, as corporate interests seek the mineral wealth of the Inuit Land (Bernauer).
[4] The statue on which the ice figure is based was located at the MacDonald Monument in Montreal until August 29, 2020, when it was toppled and decapitated (British Broadcasting Corporation).
[5] In an interview shortly after the release of *Tongues*, Tagaq described how she came to incorporate portions of *Split Tooth* as the album's lyrics. As she explained, she never intended the Text's poems as lyrics. But when she was asked to record an audiobook version of the Text, she thought "'Well, this would be a lot fucking better if there was some crazy music behind it'" (Pedder). With urging from her producer, who recognized Tagaq wanted to use *Split Tooth*'s poems as lyrics, Tagaq "went into the studio with a 'dog-eared copy of the book' and recorded the vocals with no rehearsals" (Pedder).

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