Deni Ellis Béchard and Natasha Kanapé Fontaine. *Kuei, My Friend: A Conversation on Race and Reconciliation*. Vancouver: Talonbooks. 176pp. ISBN: 9781772011951
https://talonbooks.com/books/kuei,-my-friend

Kuei, My Friend: A Conversation on Race and Reconciliation (2018) is an epistolary exchange between Innu writer, slam poet, and artist Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, and Québécois/American writer, journalist, and photographer Deni Ellis Béchard, originally published in French in 2016 under the title *Kuei, je te salue: conversation sur le racisme*. As a bilingual reader, I am often intrigued by the changes and slippages that occur within the work of translation. In effect, a word-for-word translation of the French title into English would be *Kuei, I Greet You: A Conversation on Racism*.

Kuei is the Innu word for "hello"; both versions thus put the Innu word, the Indigenous language, first and center. The shift in translation, from "I greet you" to "my friend," implies that a certain level of intimacy has already been established; the formality of the French greeting, from the original encounter, has shifted, in the English translation, to a recognizable friendship, a rapport, in other words, the very relationship that the two authors aim to consolidate through and by their correspondence. Indeed, Kanapé Fontaine signs her first letter to Béchard with *nuitsheuakan*, my friend. The other change, in the second part of the title, from "racism" to "race and reconciliation," is interesting and, I argue, politically relevant to the time of publication: in December 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) handed in their report.[1] As the authors state in their opening to the book (both versions), "these letters were written in the fall of 2015," thus anticipating many of the recommendations and findings as exposed by the TRC's report. Importantly, this shows that these conversations were and have been taking place well before the implementation of instances like the TRC. While the French version was published in 2016, the later publication date of the English version (2018) reflects some of the previous year's political and cultural discourse regarding Canada's 150th anniversary; and a major theme overall was reconciliation. Thus, the shift from "a conversation on racism" to "a conversation on race and reconciliation" is also noteworthy, as it does take something away from the fact that racism is alive and well in Canada.[2] While the issue of race is still emphasized in the English title, it is quickly coupled with that of reconciliation, coming together, forgiveness, and moving on, in and amidst our differences, in the spirit of Canada's multiculturalism. While the very issue of reconciliation is problematized in the authors' correspondence (specifically in the later letters), it is worth noting that the first, intended audience for *Kuei* were "high school- and college-aged" youth[3]; however, their "readership [quickly] turned out to be much larger and in no way limited by age" (Kanapé Fontaine and Béchard 2).

I am purposefully being nitpicky about the choice of words here to draw attention to the importance of the decisions that are made when works such as *Kuei* do, finally, hit the shelves; because, in fact, Kanapé Fontaine and Béchard's conversations have to do with all of these aspects: race, racism, reconciliation, but most of all, reparation. For the writers, "each letter [is] like a new treaty" (105).

The epistolary exchange was prompted following an unfortunate encounter between Natasha Kanapé Fontaine and Québécois journalist Denise Bombardier at the North Shore Book Fair in Sept-Îles, in April 2015. Bombardier, in January 2015, had written a very harsh column stating

that the cultures of Indigenous Peoples were "deadly" and "antiscientific" (Bombardier, n.p.). Her comments were met with anger by many, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, and (amongst others) an Open Letter, co-signed by Québec's Idle No More spokeswomen Widia Larivière and Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, alongside many others, attempted to return the insult back to its speaker: that it was Bombardier herself who was "a wavering vestige of a culture that kills, truly. The cult of ignorance; the culture of emptiness" (Larivière, n.p.). Bombardier was in attendance at the North Shore Book Fair as a guest speaker on a round table and, following her intervention, Kanapé Fontaine, accompanied by a group of Innu women, stood up with the intention of reading a text to Bombardier, wanting to "denounce some of the words that we found to be racist in one of her columns…to denounce the general racism against us" (qtd. in Durand, n.p.), but also wanting to "speak about the Innu community and about Indigenous culture in how it is constructive, luminous and millennial" (qtd. in Lachaussée, n.p.). Bombardier interrupted Kanapé Fontaine and, speaking into a microphone, spoke over the Innu poet and "read her definition of what an Indigenous person is from her *Dictionnaire amoureux du Québec* [Love Dictionary of Québec]" (Lachaussée, n.p.).

I am purposefully recounting the details of this encounter because I believe that this context is crucial in understanding not only how the book came to be, but that it speaks to a much larger problem. Indeed, Béchard, who witnessed the entire scene at the Book Fair, later told Kanapé Fontaine, "We should write a book, because if she [Bombardier] does not realize how racist what she just did is, that means there are plenty of people here who do not realize that there is banal racism" (Lachaussée, n.p.). The type of racism that Béchard is pointing to here is the kind that is internalized and goes hand-in-hand with invisible violence (Kanapé Fontaine and Béchard 98). In several letters, he recounts moving to Virginia, and then to Vancouver, and being perplexed by his classmates' reaction to African Americans and immigrants. Béchard also recounts the slurs directed at his own French-Canadianness by people in New England (100). He speaks of his father's racism, "a type of racism that I have heard thousands of times all over the earth, a banal and irrational racism that many humans have learned to reproduce without thinking," to which he adds, "This is exactly what renders it so dangerous: it's a reflex that expresses itself without effort" (24). Likewise, Kanapé Fontaine reflects on the racism that she has witnessed within her own community; it is an "intergenerational memory" (29), she writes, one that needs to be understood within the context of residential schools and the larger "wound of colonization" (30, 130). Ultimately, Kanapé Fontaine remarks, "the members of the two communities [the Whites and the First Nations] are often wounded by mutual ignorance. Each group is part of the imaginary of their neighbours…We just need to find a way to transform the images that we have of other people, to form our own ideas through direct human contact" (17). It is towards making this transformation possible, towards a better understanding, towards "compassion and comprehension" (38), that Kanapé Fontaine and Béchard's correspondence aims to lead their readers.

"We don't know how to listen," writes Béchard (7). Bombardier's decision to speak over Kanapé Fontaine, thereby silencing her, is symptomatic of settler anxiety, of an unwillingness to listen, within a space of competing sovereignties. It is also telling of a history of erasing voice and presence, of erasing humanity. In order to fully understand a situation or a story, reflects Kanapé Fontaine, it is important "to humanize it" (52), to engage with it, to respect it; it is an invitation to bear witness to the lives and experiences of others. This, of course, is what literature is all about:

"Literature," writes Béchard, "gives us access to the interior lives of others and allows us to perceive different ways of seeing the world" (61). To read, then, is similar to listening; both can be radical acts (62). According to Béchard, if we are willing to accept that we need not always agree, but learn to read and listen respectfully, then we can aspire to a better understanding of one another. Similarly, the exercise of writing to each other, of sharing their stories – as if they were speaking with one another – is a form of active participation (107), of (re)building trust (111) and, importantly, of recognizing and acknowledging other peoples' sovereignties (103, 112). As Kanapé Fontaine and Béchard's conversations progress through different topics – navigating the emotional territories of childhood, loneliness, and losing oneself and others, while addressing difficult events and issues like the Oka Crisis, the war in Afghanistan, violence against women and girls, police brutality, and co-opted NGOs, eventually culminating in the realization that there is, truly, a wide-scale global, neo-colonial form of racism (128) – the reader can only be drawn into the intimacy that these two writers have carefully woven; we become privy to these stories as well. Thus, when the topic of genocide becomes the main focus of letters 24 and 25, a theme that threatens to "burst" Kanapé Fontaine's heart open (131), one can only wonder what, indeed, of our humanity (132)?

"There cannot be reconciliation without reparation," concludes Kanapé Fontaine in her last letter (143). For many, reconciliation is difficult to conceive of without redress. It is even "suspicious," if and when there was not a "conciliatory experience" to begin with (Maracle 12). At the very least, it should be a personal and/or community-based process, not one that follows the dictates of the very system that is responsible for why reconciliation is a necessity. Kanapé Fontaine tells Béchard, "I'll undertake the search for the path that will lead me to my own reconciliation. Repair myself first, repair my wounds, my personal Wound of Colonization…[Then] I'll get down to work on reconciliation with you and between our peoples" (132). She does, however, provide what she believes are the necessary steps towards, first, reparation, and then, perhaps, reconciliation: knowledge (of the self, of the other), acknowledgement and understanding that there were people and societies that were here before "Discovery" and, most importantly, acknowledgement of the land, "the spiritual, philosophical, and human value of the territory" (143). She also calls for humility: "the humility to ask for healing" (143) and the humility "to acknowledge our mutual ignorance" (144). These steps, she concurs, are crucial to the process – a process that will take time, care, patience, and attention – not necessarily to reconciliation, but to decolonization (144).

Kuei, My Friend should be regarded as a crucial tool to begin the important work of thinking about how we can better learn about our responsibilities towards one another, towards the lands on which we are guests, and to the different Nations that are our hosts. How to become better listeners, better participants, better allies. As Kanapé Fontaine notes, early on in their epistolary exchange, "the work has begun" (48). Now is the time to find the ways to continue it.

Sarah Henzi, Université de Montreal

Notes

[1] The summary, as well as all six full volumes, the Calls for Action, and additional resources can be found on the website of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (http://nctr.ca/reports.php)

[2] February 2018 was particularly difficult in this respect; within weeks of each other, two important cases that had caught the attention (and hearts) of many delivered a blow to all those who were hoping for justice: the two men who were standing trial for second-degree murder – Gerald Stanley, who shot 22-year-old Colten Boushie in the head in a "freak accident" (Friesen), and Raymond Cormier, who was accused of killing and disposing of the body of 15-year-old Tina Fontaine – were found "not guilty" by, in the first instance, an "all-white" jury and, in the second instance, a "mostly white" jury (Palmater).

[3] The book includes an appendix with suggestions for classroom use.

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