

Failure to recognize (Overpass, Decarie expressway)

By Tara McGowan-Ross

For Jeff Barnaby

If we look south — Montreal south, not true south — towards the great white spire on the St-Jacques Bridge, we are situated in a relatively new dividing line in Montreal's west end. We are in Notre-Dame-de-Grace, or NDG, which is a middle-class, first-ring suburb of the city. It is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse in the city. The electoral district also includes Westmount, which begins seven blocks to the east — a historically English neighbourhood, which was once the richest community in Canada. The area is an anomaly, in that it is very English, with 41% of the population speaking English as a first language: a language minority in Quebec, which itself is the minority in predominately anglophone Canada. I am a member of the Millbrook Mi'kmaq First Nation, an Indian in Notre-Dame-de-Grace: a third layer in a nesting doll of marginalization. My father was born in Anjou, my mother in this same community, near St Joseph's Oratory on Queen Mary Road, but I was born in Toronto. I chose to live in Montreal. I chose it with my whole heart, ten years ago, and I continue to do so.

Running under us is the Decarie expressway. It was built in the 1950s, construction which forced the displacement of two hundred and eighty-five families. They were not the first to be displaced: first were the trees, a huge forest which stood here four hundred years ago. Then the access rights of the Kanien'kehá:ka and Anishinaabe, and then the Europeans who came after. The first Europeans in this area were granted title, by marauder-explorer-magistrates, by power granted by a distant king, by way of a foreign God, eight years after a group of starving seafarers first founded the settlement of Fort Ville-Marie on the south shore of our River. South means *river*, here on the north shore: a colloquialism, a word granted meaning through common usage.

All settler-colonial states have to contend with a concept recent scholars have named *colonial agnosia*: agnosia is medical term for a brain state characterized by “a failure in recognition despite no deficit in perception.”¹ Colonial agnosia, therefore, is a failure by colonial forces or populations to recognize its own power as “invasive, totalizing, and genocidal.”² The age of colonialism was informed by a European intellectual error: the ascientific mythology of race and its implications, which categorized people into types based on phenotype, or culture, and then granted those types a hierarchical ranking. This wasn’t pure evil as much as it was practical: human beings are, speaking in the most general of terms, more inclined away from violence than towards it. A eusocial, omnivorous ape, our best evolutionary adaptation is our capacity for social organization, and the domination of other human beings requires a degree of violence which appears at least distasteful to the average person under ordinary circumstances.

The colonial project manufactured a means of understanding reality in which other cultural groups were not truly human: in this view Europeans are naturally free, intelligent, and responsible with resources. As such, Europeans have an imperative to further their empires at the expense of the less reasonable, less responsible and as such less human. Colonial forces did not see their project as bad, or even ambiguous: it was good, or inevitable. The natural advancement of things: the forward march of progress.

The words which describe things inform the nature of those things, in some way or another. My name is Tara: there is a sharp tap, a masculine *r*, the softening of the two long vowel sounds. It’s gender-neutral, short, strong, and very old. I think I’d be a different person if I were a Candace, or a Lily, or a Kate. Sociologist and decolonial scholar Philippe Némeh-Nombré remarks on the weight of the words chosen, in French, to describe the colonization of what became Quebec: words like

¹ Kumar, Anil, and Michael Wroten. “Agnosia.” *PubMed*, StatPearls Publishing, 2021, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK493156/#:~:text=Introduction-.

² Villeneuve, Kathleen. “Settler Colonialism in Quebec: A Blind Spot of Academic Research? Part 1: The Words.” *Active History*, 2 May 2022, activehistory.ca/2022/05/settler-colonialism-in-quebec-a-blind-spot-of-academic-research-part-1-the-words/. Accessed 14 Oct. 2022.

peuplement, implying a vast emptiness desperate for a people. But there were people here. Colonial agnosia: the incapacity to recognize humans for humans, nations for nations. Civilizations for civilizations. Genocide for... well, you know.

In the 1960s, towards the continued effort of building Quebec as nation, the socialist magazine *Partis Pris* came upon decolonial theory and ran with it: turning out wildly effective propaganda pieces which affirmed Quebec to be a “tribe without its reserve,” and a people under constant threat from British and American colonialism. This is scandalous to most of the Anglo-Canadian left-leaning modern imagination, but there are aspects of the argument to which I am sympathetic: I do think that five hundred years is long enough to establish a culture distinct from mother France, and that settler Quebec is undeniably unique and compelling and haunted. America’s biggest export is its culture, and Quebec is surrounded on all sides by anglo North America. There is nowhere else like here on Earth. Most of the internal rhetoric of the *Partis Pris* argument is, of course, absurd: the idea that there was some magical quality to the European invaders who became this specific settler population that makes it somehow special and different than all the other ones, somehow *indigenous*, and deserving of a direct likening to First Peoples. Most Indigenous people I know find this laughable, if not deeply insulting: a distasteful joke suspended in an extended period of violence, salt in the primordial wound.

The ghosts of this rhetorical shift linger: in the race-shifting of the *metissage* concept, the persistent myth of unambiguously pleasant historical relations between French settlers and Indigenous people. A problematization of the Quebecois as indigenous is written into the language of my people’s mother tongue. In Mi’kmawí’simik, the Quebecois are called *wenuj* — a nickname, a denotation of familiarity. Quebecois presence in our language is a use-based colloquialism, meaning granted over time — like what we mean by south in Montreal. The word, literally, means *foreigner*.

The Americas, North and South, are incredible. The Americas are knotted over with scar tissue: the seat of the Great Dying. The colonization of the Americas caused the death of 56 million people, 90% of the original population, or 10% of the entire population of the planet at the time, owing entirely to a European intellectual error which misconstrued one cluster of civilizations as having some elevated place in some hierarchy of living things. An error which cast the only real tragedy as a matter of who unfairly usurped whom in the battle for who got to reap the benefits of killing the people who didn't matter. This may come as a surprise, but I don't mean any of this as a condemnation. I believe in the right of every citizen to the legitimate criticism of the mechanism of their states, and I believe that Quebec bashing is a real thing, and that a line between the former and the latter exists, and I choose my home with my whole heart. I believe we live in a shared material reality with a true history and that acknowledging it is the way forward. I recognize the sea-weary, desperate marauders, emerging hungry and hopeful from their Eastern boats — putting up their rudimentary shelters as the first wisps of winter set in, not knowing, really, what was to come. Any hate in a heart must be placed there. All atrocity is human behaviour.

I don't think there is anything fundamentally different between any two people on Creator's good green Earth. The Roman playwright, and former slave Terence, writing in 165 BC, wrote: *Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto*. In English: *I am human. I consider nothing human alien to me*. I am an Indian in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, Montreal, in Quebec, Canada, and none of it is alien to me. I'm mostly delighted by Quebec and its eccentricities. Sometimes, they make me sad: faulty reasoning for legislation which draws arbitrary lines around different kinds of old and new settler populations, the defensive deflections of legitimate criticism of the practical workings of a democracy — a cornerstone of any society as progressive as Quebec. Canada, Quebec included, has an excellent international reputation, but to me it is a *spooky* country: riddled with ghosts, fraught with painful history. I accept it as it is. I am a spooky girl.

I like to go walking through the neighbourhood, into Westmount, which is seven blocks to our left (or Montreal East). It is beautiful, and a little edgy in my social circle, as my social circle's conventions are informed by the history of Quebec-specific socialism, almost all of which I agree with, and this wealthy English neighbourhood holds a certain historical weight. I am a Mi'kmaq *québécoise d'adoption*, or an *amérindienne* as we are still often labeled in common parlance, in a way that I find less offensive than delightfully audacious. When I'm walking in Westmount I am an Indian in an English enclave of a French province inside of predominately English-speaking colony, comprising the northernmost tip of a long series of settler colonies which make up the Americas. It is a patchwork of legacies: English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch — projects which began as resource extraction machines, and which self-liberated, but not all the way. North American culture functions as a progression of that first colonial project: a culture built around the rituals of capital. All North American settler rites of passage are capitalist ones, and in a settler colony like Canada, which has existed since its conception to extract and export resources to the rest of the world, participation in cultural rites of passage depends on our willingness to participate in the exploitation of Indigenous nations and peoples. For a nation which still sees itself as yet to be born, maneuvering about that cultural reality is even trickier than it is in the rest of the colonized world: one must reject it entirely, or one must simply stare at it dumbfounded and see it for something it is not.

This highway was built in the late 50s, displacing hundreds of people. Like the Americas, it is a long knot of scar tissue — with its benign daily functionings, and its ghosts. It is that which displaced the displacement, inside a stronghold within a stronghold. Nesting dolls of constructions, based around directions which eschew material realities of longitude and latitude and magnetic North. My fancy friends in the trendy neighbourhoods don't like to visit me here. I love it. I love all it has been, and will be. It's all highways and international food. Normal daily life and long legacy of pain. I know what it is, and I choose it. I think it's very beautiful.