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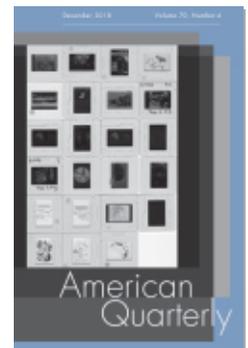
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## Seals, Selfies, and the Settler State: Indigenous Motherhood and Gendered Violence in Canada

*Elizabeth Rule*

After posting a photograph of her infant child lying next to a dead seal in an act of digital Indigenous activism, the famed Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq experienced months of harassment and threats on her life. Calling her “sick” and a “heartless, mindless, total piece of scum,” abusers operating under settler environmentalism revealed, yet again, the anti-Indigenous sentiment coursing through large swaths of the Canadian citizenry.<sup>1</sup> In defense of a seal, hunted humanely, legally, and in accordance with Inuit subsistence living, the harassers used the occasion to call for legal intervention by the settler state to further divorce Indigenous peoples from their lands and lifeways through the denial of humanity and the targeting of Indigenous women in violence. “Another Inuit tradition we are supposed to be OK [sic] with?,” one such individual rhetorically asked, concluding, “They are savages plain and simple.”<sup>2</sup>

The interconnectedness of the attacks on Tagaq’s physical well-being, traditions, and motherhood speak to the larger colonialist effort to end the intergenerational reproduction of Indigenous culture, and attempts to do so through campaigns of violence against Indigenous women. In the following analysis, I expose how accusations of unfit Indigenous motherhood exist as contemporary iterations of the enduring, powerful ideologies that once fueled mid-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century residential schools, sterilizations, and adoption and foster care abuses. The attacks leveled against Tagaq and others are specifically gendered to target Indigenous women in their roles as culture bearers and thus use gendered violence to further the colonial push to “the evisceration of Indigenous nations.”<sup>3</sup>

The 2014 digital movement in which Tagaq participated, colloquially known as the “Sealfie” campaign, emerged as an effort to confront settler environmentalist antisealing rhetoric demonizing Indigenous cultural practices. Popular television personality Ellen DeGeneres’s \$1.5 million donation to the

Humane Society prompted this particular intervention, as the organization has earned a reputation for its outspoken antisealing position. In response to DeGeneres's unilateral public condemnation of seal hunting as "one of the most atrocious and inhumane acts against animals," Indigenous activists photographed themselves in seal skin clothing and eating seal meat to relay the seals' cultural significance.<sup>4</sup> The Sealfie campaign unfolded transnationally, with participants proudly posting "sealfies" to social media that displayed their traditional ties to the seal hunt. The campaign hashtag, #Sealfie, offered a play on the words *seal* and *selfie* and provided a digital way to unite its dispersed Indigenous participants.

On March 28, 2014, Tagaq's celebrity contribution to the movement depicted her infant daughter lying next to a recently killed adult seal. Indeed, Tagaq's Sealfie proved a powerful image. On the left side of the photograph lay Tagaq's infant child. The baby rests motionless on her back, rendered immobile by the thick layering of pastel onesies—so thick, in fact, that each arm and leg only barely extends outward from the marshmallowy torso. One imagines that, although lounging outside on a bed of smooth rocks, the unevenness of the terrain and chill of the elements could not penetrate the dense baby-blue fleece. Protected under three distinct layers of hats and hoods, the infant's eyes gaze upward into the camera lens. A furrowed brow and set of chubby cheeks frame the child's pink lips, relaxed into a neutral expression, giving indication of neither happiness nor upset. One roll of baby fat peeks out between the shirt collar and round chin. Two pairs of animated puppy and kitten buttons decorate the outer coat's front zipper, further evoking a sense of childhood innocence. In the center of the snapshot, one billowing baby arm reaches out and graces the marbled back of a dead adult seal. The seal is easily twice the size of the infant—a silvery, blubbery mass shimmering in the sunlight. Its head points toward the upper-right corner of the image frame, thereby shielding its face from sight. While only a few protruding whiskers and edge of the mouth remain visible, the viewer's eyes are drawn to the fresh red blood speckling its head and staining the rocks below. The seal's short, squared foreflipper mirrors the stumpy limbs of the bundled infant. The child and seal rest together on the rocky ground, connected and unmoving, experiencing at once the warm sun and Arctic cold.

While Tagaq's celebrity allowed the Sealfie to reach a broad viewership and raise awareness for the cause, with the visibility came heightened public scrutiny. Environmentalist sectors of the Twittersverse erupted in fury over the image. Throughout the next several months, individuals barraged Tagaq with threats of violence targeting both mother and child. While the exact number of these

instances of harassment remains unknown, Tagaq reported receiving multiple hostile messages each day, over months.<sup>5</sup> Those outraged hurled insults and issued calls for state intervention, exclaiming, “She isn’t a fit mother, she’s obviously inbred, lacking intelligence.”<sup>6</sup> Some issued death threats; others dispersed Photoshopped images of Tagaq and her baby being brutalized.

This melodramatic response to Tagaq’s Sealie unfolds amid a long legacy of violence against Indigenous women. In the settler states of the United States and Canada, colonial conditions have yielded disproportionately high rates of violence against Indigenous women when compared with their counterparts from other racial groups. Native feminist theorists identify this violence—both historically and in the present—as a strategy for eliminating Indigenous governments, cultures, and peoples.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Audra Simpson identifies the very existence of Canada as contingent on institutionalized gender violence.<sup>8</sup> Throughout settler campaigns “supplanting women-centered societies with patriarchal, oppressive structures that condone and thrive on violence,” Indigenous women proved a primary target of the colonizing project.<sup>9</sup> The violent repercussions of naturalizing heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism similarly manifests in attacks against the Indigenous lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and Two-Spirit community.<sup>10</sup> Like the land itself, the settler state views Indigenous women as what could be—and must be—conquered and controlled as a way to secure and maintain Indigenous dispossession.<sup>11</sup>

The attacks on Tagaq, as an Inuk mother, represent just one manifestation of this legacy, as settler state violence clearly informed Tagaq’s attackers when they threatened her for her activism supporting Indigenous culture. The singer’s celebrity status and reputation as an avowed women’s rights advocate, however, also positioned her in the public eye. In this way, her defense of sealing through the Sealie campaign came to stand in as a public-facing representation of Indigenous women practicing their cultural ways. Thus, because of her celebrity and consequential wide influence, Tagaq’s photograph embodied not merely Indigenous women’s engagement in these traditions but the open celebration and encouragement of perpetuating them for future generations. Her display represented a strong force of Indigenous women’s defiance of Canadian settler norms and attempts at assimilation that helped empower others to do the same.

The heightened visibility and attention garnered by Tagaq’s celebrity, however, also emboldened attacks on her Indigenous culture, body, and motherhood. The settler environmentalists’ defense of the seal stands in stark contrast to the violence summoned on Tagaq; indeed, it is predicated on it. La Paperson builds on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s notion of “settler moves

to innocence” in describing settler environmentalism as “efforts to redeem the settler as ecological, often focusing on settler identity and belonging through tropes of Indigenous appropriations.”<sup>12</sup> This includes positioning settlers as stewards who must protect the land, in this case, from Indigenous peoples, at once reinforcing settler occupation and control while negating Indigenous sovereignty and deploying gendered violence. The antisealing effort championed by DeGeneres and the Humane Society—the very catalyst behind the Sealfie movement—falls in line with the settler approach to environmentalism that upholds the rights of animals while oppressing Indigenous peoples.<sup>13</sup> The views espoused by animal rights proponents such as Greenpeace, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) often reject “speciesist attitudes” but continue to operate from a vantage point that derives exclusively from an “ethnocentrically derived universalist perceptions of animal rights,” thereby bolstering white supremacy and aligning these groups with the settler colonial project on a transnational scale.<sup>14</sup>

That part of the onslaught responding to Tagaq’s Sealfie included gruesome Photoshopped images depicting violence against the singer and her child reveals settler environmentalism’s reliance on violence (and the threat of violence) as a means of hegemonic dominance and control. The first of these photographs portrays Tagaq with a completely unrecognizable and distorted face—all the skin is stripped away, revealing a gory sludge of blood, smashed bone, eyes drooping out of their sockets, and swaths of muscle being held together only by single fibers. The second image shows a man stabbing and beating Tagaq’s daughter to death with a *hacapik*—the notorious instrument used to bludgeon seals while not damaging their fur and an iconic symbol of the antisealing movement.<sup>15</sup> Both of these Photoshopped pictures of Tagaq’s beaten face and slain child draw on the theme of seal hunting, and do so in a manner that emphasizes suffering, pain, and mutilation. In this way, the harassers reveal their non-Indigenous epistemological understanding of seal hunting. For them, seal hunting is a brutal and savage practice, and the images indicate that they want Tagaq to experience the same brutality (or to at least imagine she is). Understanding the creator’s perspective proves critical for accurately interpreting the violence they intended to express when creating the images. The very creation of such images furthermore speaks to how such violence against Indigenous women, and particularly those who refuse to assimilate, is naturalized under settler colonialism.

Fundamentally, this settler brand of environmentalism and animal rights precludes the shared understanding held among diverse Indigenous communities that traditional hunting practices are carried out in reciprocal relationship

with those being hunted, as well as in accordance with the balance of the natural environment. Traditional hunting is a nonviolent act wherein the hunted give of themselves and the hunters perform the task humanely, and then use their resources in a sustainable manner and show generosity toward others.<sup>16</sup> These guiding principles translate into demonstrations of respect for the animal, humane and sustainable hunting practices, and coexistence between the human and the nonhuman. Tagaq speaks to this Indigenous perspective in describing the context from which her controversial image emerged:

I took that picture long before the “Sealfie” movement at an elder’s camp in the middle of nowhere. Some elders were sitting around drinking tea in the summertime and it was very peaceful. A boat pulled up and it was their nephew who had caught a seal. They were so happy to be able 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 snow in your mouth and then put it into the seal’s mouth so their spirit isn’t thirsty in the afterlife. It is a deep respect.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, Tagaq’s own self-described sealing practice carries a meaning much deeper than simply the obtainment of nourishment. Building on the distinction between settler and Indigenous views of sealing, Tagaq further elaborated that her Sealfie sought to express that “my daughter is fresh and the seal is fresh and we’re all equal and we should respect our food.”<sup>18</sup> Reflected in this statement is an Indigenous understanding of the relationships between human and nonhuman life as one of reciprocity. Lenape scholar Joanne Barker identifies the ordering of Indigenous peoples’ “governance, territory, and culture” around a network of interlinking relationships and responsibilities between all life as the very “polity of the Indigenous.”<sup>19</sup> In this way, Indigenous peoples look on nonhuman actors not only as active beings but also as key forces shaping the lives of humans.<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, Inuit activists argue that seal hunting constitutes a matter of life and death in their remote regions of Canada. Seal hunting provides much-needed income, a source of livelihood, and access to resources.<sup>21</sup> Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, an Inuk filmmaker, explains that Inuit people rely on the seal hunt to procure the cash needed for living expenses and groceries, among other necessities.<sup>22</sup> Tagaq elaborates, “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. My mother didn’t grow up with money—it’s very new for people, but you need it.”<sup>23</sup> Even efforts aimed at mitigating the commercial-subsistence divide, such as the European Union’s 2009 seal-product import ban, which exempted skins

harvested by Indigenous peoples in a traditional manner, have failed to yield meaningful protections for Indigenous seal hunters. Speaking to the hardships inflicted on Inuit communities following these international bans, Tagaq says,

Our only sustainable natural resource was taken from us. The suicide rate spiked because all of a sudden . . . people can't feed their families and sell the pelt to provide rent, clothing and all the things we need in this new monetary culture. I work as a substitute teacher when I go home, and some of the kids just don't have enough food. Their teeth have all fallen out and they are skinny and malnourished.<sup>24</sup>

The EU import ban's exception for Indigenous hunting products exemplifies this reality, as exports nevertheless plummeted 90 percent.<sup>25</sup> Destitution accompanies such poverty, as such conditions forced Inuit people into dependence on welfare and the suicide rate increased.<sup>26</sup>

Within this context, Tagaq's harassers not only oppose the Indigenous cultural component of seal hunting but also threaten violence in response to Indigenous peoples' attempts to merely survive. Their actions and grounding arguments suggest that Tagaq's attackers value the lives of the seals more than the lives of Indigenous peoples. Accordingly, the Sealfie backlash against Tagaq, however, did more than reveal differences between Indigenous and Euro-Canadian cultures, philosophies, and ontologies. Quite literally, these antisealing advocates call on the power of the settler state to further eradicate sources of Indigenous life and livelihood.

The invariability of violence behind the tweets conveyed the message that Indigenous lifeways, especially those of subsistence dependent on animals, are not acceptable in Canadian society, and violent settler interventions are necessary to stop their continuation. One harasser, for instance, evoked the legacy of residential schools and Indigenous adoption / foster care abuse in suggesting, "Let's start a campaign to have this child put in to [*sic*] care, this woman is obviously unfit to have a child," with another adding, "She should have the baby taken off her."<sup>27</sup> These calls for settler state intervention reveal themselves as a longing for the reinstatement of assimilationist efforts geared to Indigenous elimination, directed specifically at Indigenous women as the source of Indigenous perpetuity.

The mid-nineteenth century residential school system, implied in these vicious comments, institutionalized the disruption of Indigenous governmental structures, the breaking up of Indigenous kinship networks, and the imposition of binary gender roles. A major agent of settler colonialism in Canada, residential boarding schools emerged as a way to assimilate Indigenous populations into Euro-Canadian norms. Canada's Indian Act (1876) allowed for the forcible

removal of Indigenous children between the ages of seven and fifteen from their homes for placement in residential schools away from Indian reserves.<sup>28</sup> Once at the facilities, school administrators prohibited students from visiting family, banned Indigenous languages, and forbid students from engaging cultural or spiritual practices. In short, residential schools existed for the purpose of divorcing Indigenous peoples from their cultures and, through a process of immersion, assimilating them into the dominant, Euro-Canadian culture.

The residential school program relied on the underlying notion that Indigenous mothers were incapable. The criteria used to determine parental capability, however, was defined entirely by dominant, white standards—cut from the same ideological cloth responsible for wholesale military campaigns against Indigenous peoples. Subjective categories including “overcrowding,” “immoral conditions,” and “broken homes” all emerged as legitimate reasons, in the eyes of the state, to remove Indigenous children from their families, despite such characteristics merely reflecting differences in religious and cultural practices.<sup>29</sup> This policy continued in Canada from the onset of the Indian Act in 1876 through the closing of the last federally operated residential school, the Gordon Residential School in Saskatchewan in November 1996. Thus, when considering contemporary claims of inadequate Indigenous mothering—like those targeting Tagaq—such assertions must be contextualized by earlier iterations of the same argument, as well as placed within the larger framework of violence and colonization under which such claims emerged. In this call for child removal, then, the charges that Tagaq “isn’t a fit mother” and “is obviously unfit to have a child” derive from a Eurocentric model of motherhood that seeks to shape Indigenous peoples into “settler state citizens” and suggests a settler sense of entitlement to control and regulate the domestic life of Indigenous women and children.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the accusations of unfitness and the longing to remove the child from Tagaq’s care speak to the adoption and foster care abuses that emerged after the closing of residential schools. Disproportionately high rates of Indigenous children being placed in foster/adoptive care replaced the largely defunct residential schools as a new strategy for achieving the same assimilative goals. As the colloquial term for Canadian state policy between the 1960s and 1980s suggests, the “Sixties Scoop” refers to the practice of child welfare agents “scooping” Indigenous children from their families and reserves.<sup>31</sup> In a 1980 Canadian Council on Social Development study, researchers reported that state agents had removed more than 15,500 Indigenous children from their homes and placed them into adoption or foster care by 1977.<sup>32</sup> The findings also showed that between 1969 and 1979 alone, 78 percent of the Indigenous

children removed from their homes and put into the adoption system had been placed in non-Indigenous households.<sup>33</sup> Another study conducted by the Manitoba Ministry of Community Services found that fifty-eight of the ninety-eight Indian adoptions in 1980 not only placed Indigenous children in non-Indigenous homes but removed the children from Canada entirely and sent them to families in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, many of these Indigenous children suffered ongoing abuses while in the care of their adoptive or foster caretakers. Survivor testimonies expose the rampant sexual, emotional, and physical abuse that occurred after they had been stolen from their Indigenous communities. Others also lament that they feel disconnected from their Indigenous heritage, families, and identities. These feelings of loss and displacement have even led some to commit suicide.<sup>35</sup>

Much like the residential schools, the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in adoption and foster care relies on targeted attacks on Indigenous women. These assimilationist institutions gave (and in certain situations, continue to give) state agents the authority to impose colonialist standards of parenting on Indigenous mothers to be in compliance with federal law. When the state finds an Indigenous mother to be operating outside those ideals, the woman is criminalized and her child is removed from the home and, in most cases, placed in a non-Indigenous household. Those of Tagaq's harassers calling for the removal of her child from her care identified her support of traditional seal hunting as a demonstration of her "clear" unfitness. Read with the traumatic legacy of assimilationist policy in mind, these calls for state intervention demonstrate the threat that sealing, an expression of Indigenous sovereignty, poses to that of the state. They furthermore highlight the coordination of the settler state and settler citizens to impose Indigenous assimilation, and the violent tactics with which contemporary expressions of Indigenous culture and pride continue to be met.

In several comments, others questioned Tagaq's intelligence in these calls for child removal. PETA's senior vice president Dan Mathews commented that "Tanya [Tagaq] should stop posing her baby with a dead seal and read more," implying that Tagaq is uneducated and attempting to connect this practice of Indigenous culture to a lack of intelligence.<sup>36</sup> This presumed lack of education, then, provides another justification for deeming Tagaq an unfit mother and denying her humanity. Yet another harasser described Tagaq as being "obviously inbred, lacking intelligence."<sup>37</sup> By linking Tagaq's support of and engagement in seal hunting to her being "inbred" and "lacking intelligence," these arguments invoke the scientific racist thinking responsible for establishing racial hierarchies and attempt to structure society around that ordering.<sup>38</sup>

Such assertions are troubling, as scientific racism held that social deviancy and genetic inferiority were biological traits and, in response, bolstered settler state initiatives to sterilize Indigenous women and other women of color.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the history of disproportionate, forced, and coerced sterilization of Indigenous women marked a dark chapter in Canada. The eugenicist Sexual Sterilization Act of 1928 formalized practices targeting Indigenous women for sterilization by creating avenues through which they could easily be labeled “mentally defective.” Such a branding, then, released medical practitioners from their legal duty to obtain consent before proceeding with the irreversible procedures.<sup>40</sup> This legislation and its discriminatory policies enabled sterilization abuse against Indigenous women to go unchecked until its repeal in 1972. During that time, studies concluded, for instance, that in the four years between 1969 and 1972, Indigenous women accounted for more than 25 percent of all sterilized patients.<sup>41</sup> Even in the midst of public scrutiny—such as when the Department of Indian Affairs attempted to distance itself from the perception of its work as “a conspiracy for the elimination of this race by [sterilization],” and issued policy changes to obtain consent from Indigenous women—about 77 percent of Indigenous sterilizations still occurred without consent.<sup>42</sup>

This violence is decidedly gendered. As Tagaq’s case and the stories of countless other Indigenous families make clear, settler colonialism continues to wage attacks on Indigenous cultures and, in these efforts, specifically targets Indigenous women with accusations of unfit motherhood as a way to disrupt or halt the transmission of certain cultural ways from mother to child. Indeed, the history of Canadian government agents rounding up Indigenous children to be sent to residential schools or into non-Indigenous foster / adoptive care homes because of claims of unfit Indigenous motherhood, the horrors of forced or coerced sterilizations, and contemporary calls for the Canadian child protective services to remove Tagaq’s child from her home for living an Indigenous lifeway involving the seal hunt are intricately connected. For this reason, the efforts carried out by Tagaq’s harassers take on a highly threatening meaning rooted in a lived history of intergenerational trauma and gendered violence.

This context necessitates a rethinking of the violence leveled against Indigenous women throughout Canada and demands a new conceptual framework in which such violence must be understood as both an immediate threat to Indigenous women’s lives and a systematic attack on Indigenous nations and cultures. The death threats issued against Tagaq highlight this need by showcasing how settler colonialism deploys gendered violence against Indigenous women, and particularly attacks on Indigenous motherhood, because Indigenous women—both mothers and nonmothers—traditionally occupy the role

of culture bearer in many communities. The feminist scholar Kim Anderson (Cree/Métis) elaborates, “As mothers of the nations, Indigenous women are supposed to be revered for birthing the upcoming generations and for being their first teachers. Women are also said to be carriers of the culture—a responsibility that we have by virtue of our connection to the very young.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, then, the death threats leveled against Tagaq as an Indigenous woman and mother must be understood as having repercussions extending beyond the threatened loss of her life as an individual; rather, her death would also mean the end of a culture bearer actively engaged in perpetuating the survival of Indigenous nations, cultures, and traditions for future generations.

Despite the systemic nature of such violence, however, the Canadian state continues to address violence against Indigenous women only in a manner solely concerned with the taking of individual life, rather than in a way that considers the intergenerational ramifications of their deaths within Indigenous communities. Likewise, government efforts analyze the deaths of Indigenous women within the framework of an immediate context, rather than with an understanding that gendered violence against Indigenous women has unfolded over centuries of settler colonialism. As the Canadian state develops efforts to address its more than two thousand missing and murdered Indigenous women, the premise of such work needs first to build on the fact that violence against Indigenous women is not new. The very framework of settler colonialism depends on this violence.

Similarly, historical and ongoing violence targeting Indigenous motherhood must also be considered in any analysis, theorization, or state initiative focused on violence against Indigenous women. Attacks on Indigenous motherhood—such as those against Tagaq—remain underanalyzed in terms of how they connect to both historical efforts to eradicate Indigenous nations through forced assimilation and sterilization and contemporary violence against Native women. The success of these efforts—residential schools, sterilizations, foster care schemes, and adoption abuse—relied on the delegitimization of Indigenous motherhood as a precursor to remove Indigenous children from their cultures and nations and raise them instead within EuroCanadian families, or to prevent those children from existing in the first place. In this way, attacks on Indigenous motherhood functioned as a form of gendered violence in service of settler colonialism. Tanya Tagaq’s experience of harassment—a response to the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous culture—manifested in attacks on her as a mother and used this same gendered and violent strategy in an attempt to divide an Indigenous woman culture bearer from her child. Her

experience of this violence, made public by virtue of her celebrity and social media, shows that these same tactics remain in play today.

Fortunately, with the exception of the very real psychological and emotional trauma such an ordeal would elicit, neither Tagaq nor her daughter suffered a physical attack that resulted in bodily harm. Still, the abuse weighed heavily on Tagaq. She summarized plainly, “I can’t handle people saying I’m an unfit mother,” and likened the pain of the experience to having her body covered in boils.<sup>44</sup> After enduring months of daily harassment, Tagaq received some relief after resorting to police intervention to have the most obscene harasser’s Twitter account disabled, halting contact from one particularly offensive and aggressive animal rights activist.<sup>45</sup> While the details of this police involvement remain private for safety reasons, what is clear is that although Tagaq eventually found reprieve through the successful deployment of law enforcement, these same actors fail thousands of Indigenous women across Canada.

Indigenous activists, organizers, and leaders alike emphasize that state measures to curb violence against Indigenous women and girls remain radically insufficient. In the notorious case that launched Canada’s National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, two police officers stopped a vehicle transporting the already reported missing Sagkeeng First Nation teenager Tina Fontaine, but failed to take her into custody. Fontaine’s body was recovered in a bag in Winnipeg’s infamous Red River just days after the traffic stop, on August 17, 2014.<sup>46</sup> After nearly a year and a half, police arrested and indicted fifty-three-year-old Raymond Cormier on charges of second-degree murder in connection to Fontaine’s death.<sup>47</sup> On February 22, 2018, an eleven-member jury found Cormier not guilty.<sup>48</sup> Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Grand Chief Sheila North, along with many tribal leaders, denounced this verdict as a display of how “the systems, everything involved in Tina’s life, failed her.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, taken together, the reluctance of the police officers to respond to the missing person’s notice during their encounter with Fontaine, the extended duration of time it took to make an arrest, and the eventual acquittal attest to the systemic preclusion of protection and justice for Indigenous women within the Canadian state.

Police decisions to decline intervention in subsequent initiatives further showcases this failure. In particular, after the recovery of Fontaine’s body, Bernadette Smith organized Drag the Red, a volunteer group that searches the Red River for clues that will assist in cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and that will provide closure to the women’s families.<sup>50</sup> Nearly every day volunteers take to the river on a boat, tossing in hooks and nets, raking the

shoreline, and sorting through garbage for bones, bloodied clothing, wrist ties, car parts, or any other potential evidence of crime.<sup>51</sup> Despite Drag the Red's successful uncovering of evidence for investigation, Winnipeg police refuse to support the volunteers' efforts.<sup>52</sup>

In the current moment of heightened attention to addressing state atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples, Tagaq's experience plays a critical role in casting long-standing gendered violence into the limelight and in making clear the colonialist motives behind attacks on Indigenous women. The Sealfie incident offers a high-profile lens exposing contemporary attacks on Indigenous motherhood, as well as the ways in which assaults on Indigenous motherhood factor into gendered violence and the settler colonial project more broadly. Ultimately, the settler colonial ideologies and structural forces at work behind the backlash against Tagaq's Sealfie are strikingly similar to those that informed forced assimilationist institutions of residential schools, adoption / foster care abuse, and sterilizations, as well as the failure of the state criminal justice system to investigate the thousands of cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and to prosecute suspects in a way commensurate with violent crimes against other women.

Tanya Tagaq did not find herself the target of gendered violence as a result of her residential school background or any set of conditions the Canadian state uses to define the "vulnerability" of Indigenous women. The attackers did not confront her because she was a sex worker, party girl, or addict, as the media's racist character assassinations of missing and murdered Indigenous women would lead the public to believe. Rather, settler environmentalists issued threats on her life and challenged her fitness as a mother because she was proud to publicly share and advocate on behalf of a part of her Indigenous culture—seal hunting—in a refusal of assimilation, which was further highlighted by her displaying the transmission of this Indigenous lifeway to her child, a symbol of the future Indigenous generations. As Canadian society, the state, and Indigenous nations grapple with the current Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women tragedy, an analysis of attacks on Indigenous motherhood—in all its varied manifestations, and from the onset of settler colonialism through the present—offers another lens through which to understand the history, motivators, and intergenerational ramifications of violence against Indigenous women, as well as new insights for how to effectively redress it.

## Notes

- Chokma'shki to my adviser and mentor, Matthew Pratt Guterl, and to the editorial board at *American Quarterly* for your guidance, wisdom, and insights.
1. Dave Dean, "Tanya Tagaq's Cute Sealie Pissed Off a Lot of Idiots," *Vice*, April 4, 2014, [www.vice.com/en\\_ca/read/tanya-tagaqs-cute-sealife-pissed-off-a-lot-of-idiots](http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/tanya-tagaqs-cute-sealife-pissed-off-a-lot-of-idiots).
  2. Ibid.
  3. Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 7.
  4. "Stop Seal Hunting in Canada Now," *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, April 6, 2011, [www.ellentv.com/2011/04/06/stop-seal-hunting-in-canada-now/](http://www.ellentv.com/2011/04/06/stop-seal-hunting-in-canada-now/).
  5. Jason MacNeil, "PETA Responds to Tanya Tagaq's Polaris Slam: She Should 'Read More,'" *Huffington Post Canada*, September 23, 2014, [www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/09/23/peta-response-tanya-tagaq-seal\\_n\\_5870238.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/09/23/peta-response-tanya-tagaq-seal_n_5870238.html).
  6. Dean, "Tanya Tagaq's Cute Sealie Pissed Off a Lot of Idiots."
  7. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8.4 (2006): 387–409; J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "A Structure, Not an Event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5.1 (2016), [csalateral.org/wp/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-settler-colonialism-during-indigeneity-kauanui/](http://csalateral.org/wp/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-settler-colonialism-during-indigeneity-kauanui/); Mark Rifkin, *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
  8. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 12.
  9. Sarah Deer, *The Beginning and End of Rape: Sovereignty of the Soul* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xiv.
  10. Scott Lauria Morgensen, "Theorizing Gender, Sexuality, and Settler Colonialism: An Introduction," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2.2 (2012): 2–22; Jennifer Nez Denetdale, "Carving Navajo National Boundaries: Patriotism, Tradition, and the Diné Marriage Act," *American Quarterly* 60.2 (2008): 289–94.
  11. Deer, *Beginning and End of Rape*.
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