The Fire Elsewhere: Flames as Metaphor for Violence Abroad in *Incendies*, *Monsieur Lazhar*, and *Inch'Allah*

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Abstract

This paper intervenes in discussions on Québécois cinema, tracing how the trope of fire as a symbol for violence in the Arabic-speaking world has been used in Québécois films as a foil against which the province measures its own peacefulness. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010), *Monsieur Lazhar* (Philippe Falardeau, 2011), and *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012) portray, with varying degrees of nuance, the Middle East and the Maghreb as places where intrinsic violence is represented by fire—think of the burning bus on the poster that has become emblematic of *Incendies*. This attribution of fire (real and metaphorical) to *elsewhere* casts public notice away from the fires that rage at home, diverting attention from the wildfires caused by settler colonial forestry regimes and the dangers of petroculture. In contrast to the fiery violence portraying the Middle East, Quebec in these three films emerges as a moist, life-nurturing place, a myth of tranquility and harmony. The flattering juxtaposition elides Quebec's colonial history and its past and present disregard for Indigenous populations; instead, these three films seem positioned to enlist new immigrants to a settler cause characterized by false innocence. The films reflect back to Québécois viewers an image of themselves as a generous, welcoming people offering a land of refuge free of the fiery terror of violence.

Keywords: Québécois cinema, Fire, Middle East, Maghreb, colonialism, immigration

Contemporary Canada, at least in its liberal-government iterations, has attempted to portray itself as a *terre d'accueil* for refugees and economic immigrants: "it is assumed that a diverse population is an asset for the cultural and social fabric of Canadian society".[1] The degree and quality of welcome faced by actual refugees and immigrants in the various provinces can be debated, of course,[2] and yet governmental publications that describe the nation strive to present the image of a hospitable land and people. *Discover Canada*, the yearly-updated study guide used by "newcomers" to prepare for the citizenship examination, begins with a gesture of hospitality: "Welcome! It took courage to move to a new country. […] You are becoming part of a

great tradition that was built by generations of pioneers before you. Once you have met all the legal requirements, we hope to welcome you as a new citizen with all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship".[3] The welcome is articulated as extending from long-established pioneers to new ones, thereby clearly orienting Canadian citizenship along the trajectory of settler colonialism.

The image work of *Discover Canada* furthers the myth of settler colonialism as creating an ideal land of welcome. Strikingly, it uses water imagery in order to do this—water, or "blue gold" [*or bleu*]. The color scheme of the title page of *Discover Canada* balances out reds and blues: the blue of the ocean seen from space (conveniently shot through the elbow gap of the Canadarm) in contrast to the maroon-red filler rectangles, scarlet tulips in front of Parliament cut against a considerable stretch of blue sky, a vermilion maple leaf on a royal blue background: **[Fig. 1]** The largest image features a photo of a white man and woman canoeing on the Rideau Canal in Ottawa, with the towers of Parliament rising in the background against a flawless blue sky, the muted red of their life jackets maintaining the blue/red theme even as their banana-yellow canoe stands out, matching only (and barely) the gilded golden accent line that traverses the photo of the interior of Quebec's Assemblée Nationale blue room.[4] In the large canoeing image, Canada emerges as a well-managed landscape where a heteronormative pair gracefully maneuvers the artificial calm of the man-made waterway's fluid turquoise-tinged water. The white appropriation of Indigenous transportation technology is an unspoken commonplace, a silent self-evidence; this image suggests that Canadianness includes Indigenous cultural artefacts, but not Indigenous peoples (the small

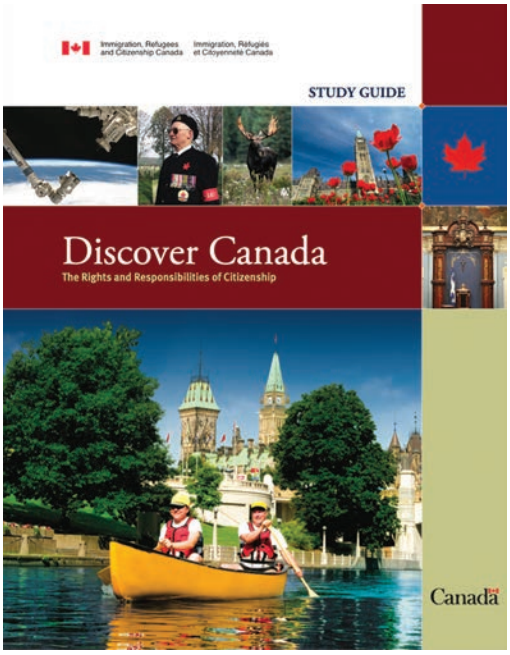

Figure 1. Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship. Study Guide* (2021).

photo of a white World War II veteran, identified as Canadian by his red armband against the background of an autumnal French cemetery, reinforces Canada's ties to Europe). The water around the canoe, which occupies almost a third of the image and which anchors the entire first-page collage, defines Canada as a place of peace and temperateness—although the turquoise is probably photoshopped; the canal is lovely, but it is *not* turquoise.

I contrast this constructed image of Canada, which is presented to real immigrants, to the image of Canada that is constructed in fictional films about immigration and transnational travel. Films are important to study because they are a form of "public pedagogy" and "cultural politics".[5] By studying image pattern signification in films, I'm investigating what kinds of cultural and ideological configurations are being taught and how they relate to the nation's politics. Specifically, I examine three Québécois films from the early 2010s that juxtapose Quebec to the Middle East and the Maghreb: *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010), *Monsieur Lazhar* (Philippe Falardeau, 2011), and *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012). These twenty-first-century fictional works all play with metaphorical tactics to ascribe peacefulness to Quebec, attributing fire as a symbol of violence to far-away places. The most internationally famous of these films is doubtless *Incendies*, which can be considered the first in a series of similar works. *Incendies*'s powerful indexing of fire as Middle Eastern violence created something of a short-lived genre: in 2011, Philippe Falardeau directed *Monsieur Lazhar*, the story of an Algerian refugee who becomes an unlikely elementary schoolteacher in Montreal after his predecessor commits suicide in her classroom; and in 2012, Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette directed *Inch'Allah*, the story of a young Québécois doctor living in Jerusalem and treating patients in the West Bank. These three French-language films were produced by the same Montreal enterprise (micro_scope), and the later films explicitly refer to the previous one(s) in their advertising, consciously constructing a lineage of Québécois cinematic involvement with violence in the Arabic-speaking world.

These are not the only films created by Québécois producers on the subject of immigration. Earlier films, like Denis Chouinard's *Clandestins* (1997) and *L'ange de goudron* (2001), deal with different but defining aspects of the immigrant experience: the terrifying crossing of the ocean in a container, on the one hand, and the intergenerational conflicts that can arise in immigrant families on the other. More recent films, like Bachir Bensaddek's *Montréal la*

blanche (2016) and *La femme cachée* (2024) or Sophie Desraspe's *Antigone* (2019), fictionalize yet other aspects of the life of Arabic-speaking immigrants in Quebec. But *Incendies, Monsieur Lazhar*, and *Inch'Allah* stand out in their pattern of metaphorical representation—although *Inch'Allah* represents the life of a Québécoise woman in Palestine, the reverse of typical immigration stories. And comparing the three Québécois films to the 2010 American film *Miral*, directed by Julian Schnabel—released the same year as *Incendies*, set in Palestine like *Inch'Allah* (although much earlier, in the wake of the first Arab-Israeli conflict), and concerned with violence in the Muslim world like all three Québécois films—reveals a striking difference: there is no calm, watery refuge in North America presented as a horizon of possible peace for the characters. The three Québécois films examined here thus stand apart from others.

By establishing the Middle East as a locus of violence and metaphorizing that violence with images of fire, *Incendies* sets the tone for the two subsequent works. However, by attributing fire (real and metaphorical) to elsewhere, *Incendies*, *Monsieur Lazhar*, and *Inch'Allah* cast public attention away from the fires that rage at home, diverting attention from the wildfires caused by settler colonial forestry regimes as well as from the dangers, immediate and long-term, of petroculture. Indeed, settler colonial understandings of fire, land, and humans radically altered the landscape of the continent. Conceptualizing as untouched nature (*terra nullius*) a land that had been intentionally groomed and cultivated for millennia by the careful application of fire by Indigenous peoples created a blank landscape that could be occupied and policed through the so-called "Doctrine of Discovery."[6] Extractive capitalism, which set the orientation of colonial governance, required the suppression of Indigenous cultural burning[7]; fire was conceived as antithetical to logging, settlement, and (in the long term) agriculture. In turn, the suppression of cultural burning set off a chain of reactions that eventually led to the degradation of the continent's forests and the cluttering of their floor, a gradual transformation for which we now are paying the price in the form of unprecedentedly devastating forest fires.[8]

I have written elsewhere about representations of fire and fire suppression in contemporary Québécois cinema, examining Chloé Leriche's *Avant les rues* (2016) and Louise Archambault's *Il pleuvait des oiseaux*.[9] These more recent films represent a counterpoint to *Incendies*, *Monsieur Lazhar*, and *Inch'Allah*, facing the fires of our present moment. It is true that wildfires

intensified in the 2010s, with 2013 recording over 1,800,000 hectares burned compared with an average of around 120,000 over the ten previous years.[10] This is not to say that there were not significant fire seasons in the 2000s, but public awareness has grown over the last decade and a half. In fact, the highly destructive May–June 2010 wildfires in the Mauricie region, which sent particles and smog all the way to Montreal and over the US border and which forms the backdrop for Leriche's 2016 film, marks a turning point in how wildfires affect densely populated areas in the south of the province.

Settler colonialism has also affected waterways in Quebec, most famously through the log-driving industry, through hydroelectric dam projects, and through pollution and waste. Films on these topics abound: see, among others, the 1957 ONF short bringing to life Félix Leclerc's "La drave," Arthur Lamothe's 1963 documentary *Bûcherons de la Manouane*, Jérémie Battaglia's 2021 documentary *La goutte de trop*, Dominique Marchais's 2023 documentary *La rivière*, and Nadine Beaudet's 2024 documentary *Manicouagan*. The earlier films idealize settler colonial workers in these water-based industries, while the more recent films present a more critical view. In addition, water in Quebec can be extremely dangerous; semi-regular springtime floods force evacuations along rivers and lakes, and drownings occur with frightening consistency in relation to swimming, boating, and even skating accidents. *Incendies*, *Monsieur Lazhar*, and *Inch'Allah*, however, represent water in varying ways (I will examine swimming pools, rain and fog, dirty slush, a calm evening on the Saint Lawrence River) that are entirely detached from water-based industries and dangers. Indeed, these three films portray Quebec as a calm, moist, green, life-nurturing place, a myth that resembles *Discover Canada*'s serene white canoers on a turquoise Rideau Canal—and that contrasts sharply with representations of the Maghreb and the Middle East as locales defined by fiery violence. The flattering juxtaposition elides Quebec's (and Canada's) violent colonial history as well as its past and present disregard for Indigenous populations, falling in line instead with government propaganda oriented to enlist new immigrants to the settler cause.

Incendies: Establishing a Middle East on Fire

The 2010 blockbuster *Incendies*, directed by Denis Villeneuve, is the earliest among these works, and it established the basic pattern that later films adopted and simplified. Based on a 2003 play of the same name written by Wajdi

Mouawad,[11] it was produced by the very successful Montreal production company micro_scope, seeing wide distribution both domestically and abroad. It was also prized by juries, earning a nomination for an Academy Award for best foreign language film as well as winning eight Canadian Genie awards, including for best motion picture, best adapted screenplay, and best cinematography. Of the series of films discussed in this article, *Incendies* is probably the most widely known; it is also the most nuanced in terms of its metaphorical use of fire. Yes, it does attribute symbols of fire to Middle Eastern violence and of water to Canada, but it also subtly unsettles this dichotomy in a way subsequent works do not.

The film names fire as its titular sign. Fire also punctuates the 2003 Wajdi Mouawad play on which the film is based, present in the titles of its chapters: "Incendie de Nawal," "Incendie de l'enfance," and so on. But as Esther Pelletier and Irène Roy suggest, "La version d'*Incendies* du dramaturge relève davantage de l'évocation qui suscite l'imaginaire, tandis que celle du réalisateur parvient à montrer plutôt qu'à dire".[12] Indeed, Villeneuve's film indexes very real, visible fire as a weapon of war, repeatedly using smoldering buildings to represent recent attacks. One of the film's iconic images, used in posters and on DVD covers, is that of a burning bus—we learn it was set on fire by a militia in reprisal for another atrocity. **[Fig. 2]** For Mouawad

Figure 2. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

and Villeneuve, however, fire is also metaphorical. "Incendies" in the plural symbolizes the multiple traumas of the civil war in an unnamed Middle Eastern country resembling Lebanon, its indiscriminate and endlessly retributive violence, and the devastation it leaves in the memory of its survivors. In *Incendies*, Mouawad and Villeneuve play on both the wreckage and the transformation that fire brings. Because Nawal Marwan, a young unmarried mother, is forced to abandon her son at birth, she does not recognize him in the jailer who rapes her during the civil war and who becomes the father of her twin children, Jeanne and Simon. The smoldering crucible of the civil war transmogrifies a son into a father, a brother into a father. Nawal recognizes her torturer-and-son years later, after both she and he have separately emigrated to Montreal, as she swims in a public swimming pool.

Nawal's testament assigns to her twins the burden of searching for their father-brother, an assignment that brings them to the country of her birth before returning them to Montreal. *Incendies* is a transcontinental work, bringing North America in close contact with the Middle East through the exilic experience of Nawal and her children. In this context of exile occasioned by the violence of war, fire becomes a tool to construct narrative contrast opposing old country to new country: if the unnamed Levantine country represents the violence of fire, Quebec represents the water needed to extinguish the fires of the civil war. The color palette for the two settings contrasts sharply, dusty beiges and blinding sand dominating the Middle Eastern scenes whereas dark greys and blues characterize Quebec. [**Fig. 3**] [**Fig. 4**] Images of the pool—both in flashbacks to the summer scene in which Nawal recognizes her son-rapist and in later images of the pool in winter, containing remnants of water—reinforce other recurring images of rain, puddles, and snowbanks to establish Quebec as the place where fires come to die. [**Fig. 5**] [**Fig. 6**]

Figure 3, Figure 4. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

Figure 5, Figure 6. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

Quebec's watery peace also transforms people. Nihad (renamed Abou Tarek), the son-torturer, works for the Société de Transport de Montréal. We see him from the back pushing a cart into a garage where buses are repaired and cleaned. At first, his entrance seems threatening: we hear the strident sound of tools cutting through metal, and we see a jet of flying sparks coming from under a bus—echoing images of the burning bus in the desert and associating fire with bus transport and violence. **[Fig. 7]** In Montreal, however, the fire is contained, and Abou Tarek does not wield it. Instead, the scene cuts to a shot of the former torturer holding a spray bottle containing the exaggerated blue of Windex; he is a bus cleaner, separated from the potential violence of fire and forced to conform to a domestic role plying liquid. The bus seats' deeper blue

Figure 7. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

blends with his own uniform, suggesting his integration into the peacefulness of Montreal society. **[Fig. 8]** The film ends with the repentant son-torturer stan-

Figure 8. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

ding silently before Nawal's grave against a verdant springtime that contrasts sharply with the sandy beiges with which the war-torn Middle Eastern country is represented. In Montreal, the last scene of the film implies, water brings renewal and the closure of the cycle of senseless violence, Quebec's symbolic liquidity putting out the metaphorical fires of a senseless war. **[Fig. 9]**

In addition to erecting this clear dichotomy, however, *Incendies* also problematizes it, to some extent. When Jeanne and Simon visit their mother's unnamed country and finally begin to uncover the truth of their birth—that they themselves are children of their mother's repeated prison rapes—the film cuts to a scene of Jeanne and Simon swimming, presumably at the hotel pool. Their "cannonball" entrance into the water, filmed from below the surface, sounds like an explosion, and the rapid, frenzied thrashing of their limbs as they freestyle to exhaustion blurs their identities, so that it is sometimes difficult to tell, in the violently churning water of each tight frame, whether the swimmer is a man or a woman. **[Fig. 10]** **[Fig. 11]** When they come to a stop at the end of the pool, the camera films them from the side, level with their heads, with Simon beyond Jeanne. Their fluid proximity reminds us of the

Figure 9. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

Figure 10, Figure 11. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

womb. As Simon steps forward in the water, turns to face Jeanne, and leans toward her, however, the camera's perspective makes us uncertain of their position relative to each other. **[Fig. 12]** **[Fig. 13]** We see their knees interlocking under the water as the space between them slowly diminishes, and it appears that their mouths will meet, hinting at a reiteration of their fiery incestuous parentage. Only after a tense leaning in does Jeanne's profile disappear behind Simon's, resolving into a fraternal embrace. **[Fig. 14]** The water surrounding them becomes the womb again, and they float in the liquid of their conjoined sorrow. This hotel pool scene, with its uterine metaphors, shows that the unnamed Middle Eastern country was never simply the arid burning setting suggested by earlier scenes; the mother's womb and the springtime of her three children's births existed there, too.

Figure 12, Figure 13. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

Figure 14. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

Similarly, *Incendies* challenges Quebec as a site of perennial wateriness. At the end of the film, after the twins deliver their mother's letters to their brother-father Nihad, he enters his bland Montreal apartment to read Nawal's "Letter to the son." As his eyes travel along the lines of the letter, which we hear through Nawal's voice-over, the camera pans slowly and incongruently to the thermostat on the wall. As Nawal's voice reads "I recognized you," all we see is a section of white wall and the off-center beige rectangular prism with its round knob and translucent plastic cover, its inner workings suggested by the dark gap between the wall mounting and the main body of the apparatus. **[Fig. 15]** The pan to the thermostat suggests that the temperature can rise here, too, that nowhere is entirely safe from fire. The thermostat as object, however, indicates an ability to control the

Figure 15. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

heat: Nihad, the former torturer, has learned to control his "gift" (as the militia leader Chamseddine had called his propensity to kill and maim). Indeed, when Nihad reads the "Letter to the father," in which Nawal, identifying herself as "Whore #72," accuses him of torture and states that Jeanne and Simon know who he is, his first instinct is violent: he runs out after them. They have already gone, but Nihad's searching glare is that of the sharpshooter he had been in the fire of the civil war. Thus, if *Incendies* at first installs Quebec as the watery place where the Middle East's fires are extinguished, it then dismantles this opposition, showing that water exists within fire and that fire can enter Quebec.

Yet the thermostat and the final springtime image suggest control and renewal. The workings of technology as a symbol for the regulating mechanisms of a democratic society, and the cyclical, seasonal greenness of the province, are represented as systems that calm and extinguish the fires of violence and civil disorder that implicitly define places like the unnamed Middle Eastern country featured in *Incendies*. The film, in this way, presents Quebec as a place where violence flounders, is controlled, and can be resolved. The cold greyness of Montreal is portrayed as a welcome relief from the sun-drenched aridity and heat of the Middle East and its fiery violence—and even that greyness resolves, in the spring, into lush verdure.

There is no reference in the film to the violence enacted on Quebec soil against Indigenous peoples or the environment. Indeed, in an interview, Villeneuve states that "[he doesn't] know war at all,"[13] making it difficult to shoot "authentic" images of violent conflict—which may be personally true, but not nationally so, the way his film implies. Colonial history is valued and presented by the film as significantly deep in a positive, peaceful way. The attorney in charge of Nawal's will, Jean Lebel, gives Simon a tour of his archives, which go back to 1868, passed down from settler father to son. While the date is precise, the shot suggests the eternity of settler presence, as the archival documents go beyond the edges of the frame on both sides: **[Fig. 16]** The fact that attorney Lebel is played by Rémy Girard, a mainstay of Québécois cinema who often performs serious, well-intentioned, reflective characters, also helps establish the legitimacy of Lebel's role and of settler colonialism. Lebel, with his international connections to other attorneys, his lore of age-old attorney networks, and his sense of his own deep historical significance on a local scale, contributes to Quebec's image of itself as a welcoming, orderly place where the rule of law keeps violence in check. The violence on which the rule of law is based, however, violence against Indigenous peoples and cultures, is beyond the purview of the film and must be eclipsed for Quebec to appear as a complete negation of fires elsewhere.

Figure 16. *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, 2010).

Monsieur Lazhar and the Flames Following Algeria's Civil War

The films that were made in the wake of *Incendies* retain fire as a symbol of violence in the Muslim world, but they do not include *Incendies*'s subtler, destabilizing work of relocating heat as present though controlled in Canada, and water as a possible element of the Middle East. For these later films, the metaphor of fire as elsewhere-violence becomes essentialized and attributive. It is interesting that *Monsieur Lazhar* and *Inch'Allah* explicitly inscribe themselves within *Incendies*'s thematic groove by announcing, in their respective trailers, that they were produced by the same production company. Omnipresent posters of *Incendies* featuring the bus burning in the desert had already established a strong image association between the Arabic-speaking world and fiery violence. Relying on associations established in *Incendies*, *Monsieur Lazhar* and *Inch'Allah* construct their narratives using the trope of a violent-elsewhere-on-fire as a taken-for-granted building block. *Monsieur Lazhar* and *Inch'Allah* position themselves very differently with relation to this trope: *Monsieur Lazhar* takes place entirely in Montreal, where the fiery violence of an abandoned Algeria is a mere memory, whereas *Inch'Allah* takes place in Palestine, with occasional contrasting glimpses of Quebec.

Monsieur Lazhar, like *Incendies*, was extremely successful at the box office both at home and abroad, and it also garnered many accolades: it was nominated for the foreign-language Oscar, and it won nine Genie awards, including best adapted screenplay, best motion picture, best supporting actress (Sophie Nélisse), and best leading actor (the inimitable Mohamed Fellag, best known as a stand-up comedian—and, notably, an Algerian who took refuge in France during the civil war in the 1990s). The film, loosely based on the one-actor play *Bashir Lazhar* by Évelyne de la Chenelière,[14] tells the story of Bachir Lazhar, an Algerian refugee in Montreal, who pretends to have been a schoolteacher in Algiers in order to be hired as a replacement for an elementary-school teacher who has hanged herself in her classroom. Despite his strict methods and high expectations, Monsieur Lazhar is presented as connecting directly to his pupils' trauma, from the place of his own traumatic experience. Imed Labidi critiques the film for reproducing images of a violent and dysfunctional Maghreb, focusing on the neoliberal trends in Québécois society that rely on such archetypal (and artificial) narratives: "Bachir's account of the past perpetuates the same popular Western inaccuracies about the Algerian crisis".[15] I argue that the way the film creates

these archetypes is through associations with fire and water established first in *Incendies*, and then reproduced in *Monsieur Lazhar*.

The film is set in Montreal. Although we never see images of Algeria in *Monsieur Lazhar* other than in blue and white photos worshipfully taped inside a student's desk, we learn that Lazhar's family was killed in a criminal fire in Algiers the night before they had planned to begin their escape to Canada, victims of repressive violence because Bachir's wife had written a damning book about the civil war. Most scenes are filmed inside the school, especially in Lazhar's classroom, where walls have been repainted in watery pale blue after the suicide of the previous teacher. The hasty paint job has two purposes; to erase the haunting presence of Madame Martine, and to provide calm surroundings for children who have gone through the trauma of losing their teacher to suicide (one of the children found her body). **[Fig. 17]** **[Fig. 18]** **[Fig. 19]** The clean aqua tones of the classroom walls contrast with

Figure 17, Figure 18, Figure 19. *Monsieur Lazhar* (Philippe Falardeau, 2011).

the greyness of Montreal in early spring while also recalling its liquidity; rain and melting snow form Monsieur Lazhar's quotidian. One of the students, Alice, even calls the city "Montréal la slush," a cynical transcontinental reply to the picturesque image of "Alger la blanche" that emphasizes Montreal's cold wetness. The low-angle shot capturing Alice's upturned blue eyes, the micro-snowflakes in her hair, and the contrasting textures of her coat, scarf, and hat, establish her as the prow-figure of an innocent, welcoming Canada in all its watery grace. **[Fig. 20]** In this watery world, there is tension; teachers and administrators argue over the appropriate way to guide the children through their psychological recovery. Lazhar's visible relief when he is finally granted refugee status in a Canadian court, however, suggests that the schoolhouse tensions are nothing compared to the dangers he fears were he to return to Algiers.

The terroristic arson that killed Monsieur Lazhar's family puts Algeria in the same category of violent, fiery, Arabic-speaking elsewhere as the unnamed Middle Eastern country in *Incendies*. Fellag's flawless metropolitan French notwithstanding, the character of Bachir Lazhar is instantly recognizable by Montreal immigrants and children of immigrants (the worker at the post office, the student Abdelmalek) as a recently arrived Arabic speaker. While the fiery violence that accompanied his departure from Algeria is divulged only toward the end of the film, earlier scenes of isolation and miscomprehension between Lazhar and his colleagues suggest that he is scarred

Figure 20. *Monsieur Lazhar* (Philippe Falardeau, 2011).

by something in his past. The arrival of his wife's personal belongings shipped by her workplace in Algiers, his loneliness in his sparse apartment, and his near breakdown in response to his colleague Claire's flirtatious attention all lead spectators to expect an explanation of his solitude. Combined with the stereotype of violent and dangerous Arabic-speaking elsewheres represented spectacularly in *Incendies*, close-ups of Lazhar's expressions of intense despair when he is alone build suspense and inch the narrative closer to the disclosure of past violence. Thus, the revelation of the actual violent event that killed his family, which occurs toward the end of the film during Lazhar's refugee hearing, fulfills a narrative expectation structured by the plot, by cinematography, and by his association with an Arabic-speaking elsewhere that is assumed to be violent.

In the context of this far-away deadly violence, the film *Monsieur Lazhar* functions contrastingly "as a mirror projecting positive self-representations of Québec as a liberal, tolerant, open society, whose legal structures allow for dispossessed refugees to be recognized and welcomed".[16] The scenes featuring Lazhar's refugee hearings, for instance, present the judge as severe but fair, his lawyer as earnestly supportive; the court's questions are portrayed as harrowing and unsympathetic but ultimately necessary to prove Lazhar's good faith, and conducive to the safety of society and to his own wellbeing. Falardeau has explained in an interview that, despite the heavy subject matter, he wanted to make a "luminous" film, "just bluish at the beginning, and as the season progressed and as the film progressed, just a little warmer"[17]; this is an uplifting story of renewal rather than a hard-luck narrative about the hardships of immigration. The luminosity shines through the pool-blue tones of Lazhar's classroom and the high-angle shots of the snowy schoolyard; Canada emerges as a strange kind of aquarium that shelters his and the students' grief. **[Fig. 21]**

Within Canada, the province of Quebec, where a history of British and then anglo-Canadian domination structured two centuries during which French speakers suffered injustice, repression, and discrimination, emerges (in the film, at least) as a particularly sympathetic ground for francophone immigration. The school's immediate trauma of losing a teacher to suicide compounds latent, generational traumas linked to this history, which has been understood as a history of double colonialism—Québécois as colonial settlers, colonized in turn by anglophone political and cultural forces.[18] The

Figure 21. *Monsieur Lazhar* (Philippe Falardeau, 2011).

fact that Québécois cinema was born out of the Quiet Revolution, and that contemporary filmmakers continue to benefit from the policies and artistic culture established in the 1960s and 1970s, strengthens connections to an anticolonial undertow in Québécois film. As Falardeau himself states, "In Quebec it's different [from Canada's tapestry of immigration]. We don't have that identity crisis because we speak French, but we have this crisis of 'will we exist in still 50 years' because we have linguistic assimilation."[19] There is an underlying fear of cultural and linguistic dissolution that results from Quebec's history,[20] and yet in the film world of *Monsieur Lazhar*, with the exception of a pair of parents who are leery of the refugee-teacher, this underlying fear emerges as an effusion of sympathy and solidarity toward the fellow-francophone.

Monsieur Lazhar's well-meaning but tactlessly flirtatious colleague Claire (guilelessly played by Brigitte Poupard) is a case in point; she can be imagined as a stand-in for a sympathizing, anticolonial Québécois people. And yet the film shows how far she falls short of the mark. Her clumsy attempts at befriending Lazhar show both her welcoming energy and its misplacedness, her inability to understand his experience and her willingness to keep trying. Previous studies of the film have generally avoided analyzing Claire's character, and yet the fact that she is much more developed than she had been in de la Chenelière's play points to the heavy lifting Falardeau expects her to do in terms of representing Quebec. Claire is a much more positive presence than in the original play; in de la Chenelière's version, we hear Lazhar's half

of a conversation with Claire, his refusal to drink alcohol, and his disappointment at not connecting with her: "Je vous ai froissée… […] *(On sent qu'elle est déjà partie.)* Je suis sûr que vous étiez sur le point de m'inviter à partager votre coin de table de cafétéria des professeurs, mais j'ai tout gâché, évidemment" (25–26). Falardeau's Claire, by contrast, does not cease trying to make Lazhar feel welcome; she absorbs Lazhar's gentle rebuffs with grace, apologizes and continues to smile welcomingly.

Her efforts to woo him culminate in a *tête-à-tête* dinner at her apartment. Continuing the divergence of the film from the play, Falardeau writes a thematic link to the immigration of (French) colonial ex-subjects into Claire's attempts at welcoming Lazhar. She claims that she is also an immigrant because she was born in Chicoutimi and experienced exile as a secular missionary in Africa—a half-joking attempt at solidarity that clearly baffles Lazhar, whose family has been murdered and who is unable to equate a childhood in rural Quebec and volunteer work abroad with his own experience. Claire, by suggesting the parallel between herself and Lazhar, eclipses the story of settler colonialism in Chicoutimi, the displacement of the Innu from Pekuakami and its surrounding forests and rivers. Instead, she relies on the 1960s trope of the Québécois as colonized and accentuates it by emphasizing her work in Africa, reanimating old anticolonial solidarities—without successfully reaching Lazhar. Claire's apartment, a rich mélange of African tchotchkes and exotic hangings, is an extension of her cringe-inducing attitude of enthusiastic but uncomprehending attempts at relating, and her questions for her colleague, whom she casually calls Bachir, make him visibly uncomfortable. In this shot, we glimpse Claire's well-lit kitchen, full of mounted photos and other souvenirs from her travels; on the left, reflected in panes of the dark-framed door, Bachir's face floats, disembodied, displaced. The image shows a man unable to connect to the warmth surrounding him. [**Fig. 22**]

A key moment in their interactions comes when Lazhar observes Claire's students' performing a play written by Claire herself. In one scene, her students play Livingston exploring Africa. Monsieur Lazhar comments, "C'est truffé d'information, c'est ludique, mais à travers une vision romantique de l'époque coloniale"—to which Claire responds, playful but slightly offended (though she claims not to be), "C'est vrai que j'aurais pu parler du Congo belge, du pillage, du coupage de mains…" For her, the facts and horrors of colonialism are distant, abstract, and in the past; she does not see the

Figure 22. *Monsieur Lazhar* (Philippe Falardeau, 2011).

ongoing legacies of colonialism in the same way Lazhar does. As a result, she consistently asks the wrong questions and offers mistimed comments that curtail any real conversational exchange. Claire stands in for Quebec's inability to fully understand and make room for the experience of the refugees whom the province ostensibly welcomes.

Most tellingly, Lazhar never reveals to Claire the event that drove him to seek refuge in Canada: the politically motivated threats his family received in Algiers and the arson that killed his wife and children. If Lazhar explains the fire to the immigration officers, he does not do so to his colleagues, with whom he passes for a permanent resident rather than an asylum seeker; his fiery tragedy is a secret revealed to the film's audience but not to the character's acquaintances. The bureaucracy of the refugee process creates a barrier between Bachir Lazhar and Claire; he must lie about his status in order to be hired as a teacher. Due to the lie, though, he cannot fully belong, and this prevents him from sharing the traumas that have necessitated his flight from Algeria. Claire takes it for granted that, because Lazhar works with her, he must be a permanent resident, not an asylum seeker—and this shields her from seeing his suffering and understanding his reality. In her role as a teacher (and thus part of the machinery of the state), Claire is structurally unable to have all the information to truly adapt her welcome to Lazhar's lived experience.

The criminal fire is never shown on screen. It is narrated only once, during Lazhar's asylum hearing, and then transformed into a parable, connected

both to his family's death and to the enormous Montreal tree under which Monsieur Lazhar grades papers. The camera's low-angle shot of the tree canopy fills the screen with lacy clumps of green; the sun shines through partially, its fire subdued by the springtime foliage—an echo of *Incendies*'s lush green cemetery: **[Fig. 23]** Lazhar reads the tree parable to his students during his last class with them. Film viewers understand, where the students cannot, that the parable is about his family's death. It tells the story of a tree that loves a tiny chrysalis growing on one of its branches. When a fire burns through the forest, the chrysalis dies; the tree survives and mourns its loss. Similarly, the film implies, Lazhar lost his wife and two daughters to fire and grieves alone. Alice, Monsieur Lazhar's favorite and most sensitive student, understands—correctly—that the story is a parable for her teacher's imminent departure (he has just been dismissed); for her, the tree represents Lazhar's mourning as he leaves the students. Yet from her Montreal perspective, the fire is only metaphorical. Her enormous sympathy for her teacher, like Claire's for her colleague, cannot imagine, from the protective cocoon of Québécois comfort, that fire can also be a real, deadly element. The entire film implies a strong dramatic irony: Claire and Alice, on the one hand, are unable to even suspect the tragedy that followed Bachir Lazhar's arrival in Montreal, whereas viewers, on the other hand, have been trained by cinematic conventions, shaped in part by the influential *Incendies*, to look for fire as a sign violence in the lives of characters from Arabic-speaking elsewheres. Claire and Alice thus represent Quebec's occasionally benevolent but often

Figure 23. *Monsieur Lazhar* (Philippe Falardeau, 2011).

unreflective welcome of immigrants; beyond this narrative frame, the film as a whole represents the Québécois people's transfer of discourses of violence away from itself and onto foreign shores.

Inch'Allah and the Fires of Palestine

Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's 2012 *Inch'Allah* features Quebec's "violent elsewhere" directly onscreen. Set in Israel (but filmed in Jordan, like *Incendies*), the film opens with an explosion in Jerusalem, and the rest of the film is a flashback that explains the events leading up to it. Chloé, a French-Canadian obstetrician/gynecologist played by Evelyne Brochu, lives in an Israeli neighborhood in Jerusalem, where she is friendly with her neighbor Ava, a young Israeli soldier who staffs military checkpoints in the city. The clinic in which Chloé works is located in a neighborhood in Ramallah crowded with refugees forcibly removed from their land. Chloé's reverse-immigration tale (from Quebec to the West Bank) defies the pattern of the previous two films but nevertheless maintains Quebec as a place of desirable resources—in this case, medical support.

Chloé befriends Rand and her brother Faysal, a family of displaced Palestinians, and is devastated when she cannot save the life of Rand's newborn after Rand is forced to deliver in a car because of an Israeli roadblock. Chloé then agrees to smuggle an explosive device across the border, and we discover that the explosion that launched the film was the martyr suicide of Rand, made possible by Chloé's smuggled bomb. Critics have condemned the decision to include a suicide bombing in the film, claiming that it both plays into stereotypes about Palestinians and is not reflective of Palestine in the 2010s.[21] Yet the opening explosion, which is presented again a few minutes before the end of the film, is used as a plot point that motivates the story. Together with the firearms prominently displayed by Israeli soldiers at checkpoints and on buses throughout the film, the bombing establishes the violence of the setting. This violence is emphasized by the aridity of the landscape and by stark contrasting glimpses of a lush, moist, peaceful Quebec, contributing to a dichotomized representation of the world similar to that analyzed in *Incendies* and *Monsieur Lazhar*.

The explosion that opens and closes *Inch'Allah* creates a tidy frame of fiery destruction for the plot. We never see the explosion; we see the seconds that precede it, and we hear the sound of the detonation against a black screen.

The scene is shot similarly at the beginning and the end, focusing on potent symbols: a young boy in a yarmulke and a caged dove to highlight the religious and cultural dimension of the conflict as well as the innocence of those harmed by it. The suicide bomber herself is anonymous, shot from the back with a focus on her shiny black backpack and her loose hair, although we recognize her as Rand at the end of the film because the second version of the scene includes a shot of her applying the Deep Cherry lipstick she has been wearing throughout the film. The lipstick was given to her by Ava through the intermediary of Chloé; all three women wear the color at different moments in the film. The vivid makeup color is one of the ways in which the film establishes Chloé's desire to connect her two friends, and Palestine and Israel more broadly—although the fact that the lipstick tube is also smuggled from Jerusalem to Ramallah creates a connection with the explosive device, and the deep red color becomes emblematic of blood and death rather than friendship. And cherries, juicy and sweet orchard fruits, represent the question at the center of the Palestinian conflict: who can have access to land and water to grow fruit and vegetables, and to live? The second version of *Inch'Allah*'s bombing scene also shows a fraction of its aftermath, not the entire structure of the destroyed street café but rather a close-up of the ground, featuring smoke, rubble, broken bottles, the twisted metal of the dove cage with some loose feathers, stains of deep red blood, and most prominently, a pile of cellphones belonging to the dead, some wrecked and some ringing endlessly. [**Fig. 24**] The image of charred phones, combined with the sound of their rings and the sirens of unseen ambulances, suggests the violence of the explosion, which we hear twice but never see; the smoke emanating from the rubble serves as an index for the fire that engulfed the street and a metaphor for its destruction.

The color palette for Ramallah, dominated by beige and pale grey, resembles the dominant colors of Lebanon featured in *Incendies*. Birds in the Middle East are presented as caged; the division that separates the West Bank from Ramallah is a huge nine-meter barrier topped with razor wire. The smoke that emanates from the barren landscape further echoes the earlier film's codification of the Middle East as a place for fiery violence. [**Fig. 25**] The enormous barrier wall is portrayed repeatedly in the film as the horizon for Palestinian children who, with Rand, comb through the refuse left by Israeli settlers. The beige barrier blends with the sandiness of the roads and barren lands we see from bus windows, giving the impression of pervasive

Figure 24. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

Figure 25. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

desertification. In the no-man's land near the nine-meter wall stands, incongruous, a white lifeguard seat, tall above the debris; the lifeguard seat emphasizes the lack of ambient water in the film's Ramallah. **[Fig. 26]** A mischievous child (who is later killed by an Israeli military vehicle illegally cruising this side of the wall) climbs onto the lifeguard seat and pretends to speak to the president of Israel, using an old shoe as a phone; the playful absurdity of the scene, with its impossible shoe-string communication from the height of a lifeguard chair, enhances the sense of militarily enforced separateness from the sea and the rest of the world. The levity of the child's jokes poignantly contrasts with the destitution of his situation, his dispossession from nature

Figure 26. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

and from access to the watery playscape of any pool or seashore. This is a waterless world, the image suggests, and without water, communication and a regularly productive society cannot exist.

The film structures the violence of Palestine in juxtaposition to the Québécois landscape of Chloé's birth. We do not see Quebec often or for long periods, but what we do see is marked by *water*, fire's extinguishing element. Our first glimpse into Chloé's apartment in Jerusalem focuses on a mirror in which we see a reflection of her getting dressed—and along the frame of the mirror, stationary against her movements, are two photos of Canadian landscapes featuring bodies of water. [**Fig. 27**] In one small rectangular frame, a

Figure 27. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

long shot features a foreground of orange autumnal hills rolling toward a lake in the background; the water is still and pale. In another photo, which is cut off by the shot's top border, we see a close shot of hoarfrosted grasses hanging over the blue waters of a lake or river. And a third image (not visible in this shot), pasted on the wall above a candid photograph of young people around a table, features wildflowers clinging to a granite shoreline that drops off into the ocean. In arid Jerusalem, Chloé surrounds herself with lush images of the Canadian Shield's forests and waters.

Inch'Allah creates a dichotomy between the untenable situation of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, where Chloé's friend becomes a suicide bomber, and the quiet of the Saint Lawrence. The only live images we see of Quebec occur during conversations between Chloé and her mother, facilitated by digital communication technologies; these images enter the film via Chloé's laptop. Of the two conversations in the film, one transports us to Chloé's mother's backyard on the Saint Lawrence River: [**Fig. 28**] The shot features the backyards of suburban homes beyond a grassy green bank rising from the river's edge; in this comfortable setting, the mother is preparing to go on a date and asking Chloé's advice about which earrings to wear. Chloé, who is mourning the death of the boy who had imagined a conversation with the Israeli president on a shoe-phone, refuses to reveal to her mother what is troubling her. The darkness of Chloé's Jerusalem, with the single sphere of light in the center top of the screen suggesting the reflected moon, highlights the contrast of time zones, the physical distance between Palestine and Quebec, and the suburbanity

Figure 28. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

of the mother's backyard intensifies the difference and detachment. Laura Ilea points out the contrast: "Pendant que tout s'écroule en Cisjordanie, le bord du fleuve Saint-Laurent qu'on aperçoit à l'horizon nous apparaît comme une image irréelle".[22] Chloé brightens at her mother's inept attempt to model a first set of earrings; once the mother understands how to frame her face in the camera, we see that the earrings are *hamsa* amulets, the five-fingered good-luck charm popular in the Maghreb and the Middle East. Chloé dismisses these earrings, urging her mother to wear large wooden loops instead; it is as though she cannot bear to see the conflict she witnesses in Israel symbolically reduced to an exotic accessory in her mother's suburban date life. The transplanted *hamsa* earrings emphasize her mother's disconnection from Chloé's mourning—and the symbolic disjunction between Quebec and the Middle East.

Instead of answering her mother's questions, Chloé says, "Maman, j'veux juste voir le fleuve." It is at this point that we understand that the mother has been sitting on the edge of the Saint Lawrence, and as she turns the computer, we see the white chain-link fence that separates her waterfront backyard from her neighbors'. **[Fig. 29]** The fence, in contrast to the nine-meter walls surrounding Ramallah, suggests that in Quebec, borders are clear and arrived at by mutual agreement; the fence is transparent, not much more than symbolic—and it is sufficient to ensure peaceful cohabitation. As Chloé's mother slowly and jerkily turns the computer and its camera beyond the fence toward the water, we see the sun setting over the river, and we begin to hear bird sounds. **[Fig. 30]** Cut to a shot of Chloé, from whose eye a tear escapes,

Figure 29. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

Figure 30. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

water calling forth water. The sight of the Saint Lawrence finally allows her to mourn, as her mother's loving but misunderstanding efforts had not. Then we see an unmediated shot of the river, without the pixelation and oblique black framing of the mother's laptop. [**Fig. 31**] We hear, as though from the mother's perspective, the lapping sound of the river's small waves, and the bird songs come through clearly, without the slight dampening of a computer microphone. Through their experience of the Saint Lawrence, the scene suggests that mother and daughter can commune. The representation of Quebec, however, is whitewashed; there is no hint of the settler colonial violence that allowed families like Chloé's to own their comfortable riverside

Figure 31. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

homes, nor is there any reference to the spring floods that semi-regularly prompt evacuations along sections of the Saint Lawrence and its tributaries.

Over the course of the film, Chloé has two contrasting relationships with men that help define the Middle East's representation as a dry, fiery place. One is a long-lasting relationship with her friend Faysal. One evening, Faysal takes Chloé to an outdoor concert, where they listen to a man playing *oud* and a woman singing nostalgic songs of displacement. The neighborhood through which they walk after the concert is lit with street braziers at which resistance fighters stand guard; these bright orange flames in the dark, and the smoke that can be seen rising above them from a distance, echo images of *Incendies*, reinforcing the latent violence that undergirds the scene. The resistance fighters tease Faysal about his car and his relationship with Chloé, hinting they might be useful to them in the struggle. By juxtaposing the car and Chloé in their edgy banter, they are metaphorically implying that Chloé, who can cross the border and is therefore mobile like a car, could be used to transport material—which she does end up doing, smuggling in the explosive device for Rand's martyr mission. The militants doubtless represent members of Hamas; their brief appearance as gun-toting, lewd thugs provides a unidimensional portrayal of the group.[23] This portrayal reinforces the film's representation of the Levant as a place of irrepressible violence.

Faysal, one of the film's quiet heroes, is dismissive of the militants; he and Chloé leave them, and Faysal dares Chloé to stay in Ramallah overnight. When Chloé wakes up the next morning in Faysal's room, she opens her eyes to a wall covered by large posters of lush green and blue photographs. **[Fig. 32]** A palm-tree lined beach shines its turquoise water at the head of the bed; close-ups of pink flowers and their green oval-shaped leaves reflect nourishing sunshine; an indistinct fish swims through cerulean waters; cypresses, olive trees, and cedars surround sunny, blue-shuttered houses; a painted landscape features a river flowing from a mountain, with evergreens on its left back and deciduous trees on its right. But covering all these lush and moist landscapes are smaller posters of martyrs who have given their lives for the cause of Palestinian liberation. Green and blue landscapes are merely a distant dream for Faysal, whose bedroom wall presents a visualization of the cost, in human lives, of the struggle to have access to lush natural spaces.

The film shows us both the difficulty of getting to these green spaces and their beauty. Chloé negotiates with Ava for a day pass for the family to visit

Figure 32. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

their old home. As they drive away from Ramallah and its nine-meter barrier, we see green valleys and passing trees, shot from behind Safi's head; Rand's young brother is fascinated with the landscape and spends the trip with his head out of the window. Faysal and Rand have difficulty finding the old village on the map of the re-labelled countryside; in a transformed territory, they must rely on natural features (watercourses, hills) to find their old home. But eventually they do. It is an oasis of a place, with the clear waters of a river running swiftly next to the rubble representing their former home: **[Fig. 33]** *This* is the inaccessible green landscape that haunts Faysal and decorates his wall. Rand and her mother share a chuckle as they squat to pee in the wreckage of the

Figure 33. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

old bathroom, the soft sound of liquid hitting dry ground reminding us of the binary that structures the film. The mother's green scarf and Safi's Superman cape bring gaiety to the picnic. Rand's brother Faysal, however, cannot share their easy happiness; against the sounds of crickets and birds, he reproaches Chloé, saying, "Have you ever had anything stolen that you can't replace? […] Would you like to see it, but not be able to touch it?" He is angry with Chloé for bringing the family here, for reminding them that without her this place is inaccessible. She can cross borders and territories easily; throughout the film, she maintains an "in-between" status that allows her to cart things (or in this case people) back and forth. Faysal rebukes her for trying to extend her "in-between" status to him and his family. Unlike Chloé, they belong firmly to a specific side of the conflict by virtue of their experience of territorial loss, and they are further entrenched on that side by their alliances with rebel groups. The day ends with his anger as he glares at Chloé, wordlessly ordering her to exit the car once they reach the uniformly beige border of the West Bank.

Chloé's second relationship is a one-night stand with an Israeli man whom she meets at an electronic dance club in Tel Aviv. Whereas the outdoor concert with Faysal was an experience of nostalgia and conscious remembering, the club scene, while also musical, is a visceral process of forgetting through alcohol and unrestrained dance movements. The scene cuts to Chloé on the beach, next to an anonymous Israeli man; the turquoise water is visible on the left of the shot as Chloé is awakened by her phone ringing. **[Fig. 34]** The water here is not rejuvenating or refreshing, and neither is the relationship—Chloé

Figure 34. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

leaves the man without a glance. The water that *is* important at that moment is Rand's uterine liquid, which has broken, in Ramallah far from Chloé, who feels remorse over her night of forgetting. The cinematographic work captures the beach as a blindingly bright, dry, infertile space, encrusting her jeans with grittiness. The thirsty beach matches Chloé's impressions as she wakes up hung over, and the guilt-laden water of the Mediterranean she sees is a far cry from the consoling Saint Lawrence. Moreover, the turquoise sea is out of reach for Rand, Faysal, and their compatriots, whose horizons are concrete walls.

The film ends with Rand's voice reading, from beyond the grave, her martyr's farewell: "I am not a wall, and I am not a stone. My blood, tell my story. I greet those I love. I hope to see you again in heaven." As she speaks, we see her six-year-old brother, Safi, knocking a small stone against the enormous wall that towers over him. **[Fig. 35]** The boy always wears a Superman costume, an ambiguous reminder of both American cultural imperialism and the future's potential transformative strength. The setting features both fire and water: smoke from a trash heap rises in the middle distance, and a grimy puddle in the foreground reflects Safi's image, so that two small Supermen knock at two immense walls, suggesting the futility and immateriality of the attempt. As Rand assures us that she is neither wall nor stone, that her blood has a narrative of its own to tell, and that her sacrifice has opened heaven up to her, Safi miraculously breaks through the colossal wall and glimpses his own small portion of heaven. *We* do not see it, however; the scene cuts to Safi's eye, seen from the Israeli side of the barrier. **[Fig. 36]** We know about

Figure 35. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

Figure 36. *Inch'Allah* (Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, 2012).

that side only what he whispers to us, breathlessly, almost experimenting with sound: "A very tall tree, and another smaller one, growing right next to it." The greenness of the beyond—Eden, paradise on earth—is blocked to us as it is to Ramallah's inhabitants. The film ends on a long immobile shot of Safi's eye through the larger eye of the wall. The tall tree and its small relative also stand as metaphors for what is missing in Safi's world: his infant nephew, dying in Chloé's arms as Israeli soldiers refused to let her bring him to the hospital.

The Saint Lawrence at sunset, which we glimpsed through Chloé's computer, represents a peace that is completely out of reach for the Palestinians we meet in this film. Rand's family also used to have a riverside property, like Chloé's mother. They continue to dream of it; it decorates their crowded current abode. They pierce walls to try to find it again, but it is no longer theirs, and they must do with the piles of rubble, the fires, and the dirty puddles that exist on their side of the barrier. The defining element of *Inch'Allah*'s Levant is the fiery explosion that begins and ends the film, providing both a shorthand for the region *and* the motor for the plot.

Conclusion

By underscoring fire as a metaphor for violence in loosely defined "far away" places, and by representing Quebec with contrasting images of water, *Incendies*, *Monsieur Lazhar*, and *Inch'Allah* suggest that Quebec is a land of peace. The metaphorical landscape presents the North American province

as the opposite of Middle Eastern and Maghrebi violence. And yet this metaphorical landscape favoring Quebec as a place of tranquility, goodwill, and harmony elides the violence that has been and continues to be done there. There are many violences; colonial violence past and present, for one thing, and the radical and near total settler colonial appropriation of territory. While the white chain-link fence seems benign compared with the nine-meter concrete wall, it implies a settler-colonial approach to ownership of land through privatization. One of the results of these policies is an ever-shrinking public access to bodies of water, so that the coveted "blue gold" remains the prerogative of a privileged few. In addition, decades (centuries, in some areas) of settler colonial land management policies have led to the gradual encumbrance of forests with underbrush and deadwood, creating the conditions for the devastating wildfires we experience in the twenty-first century.

And this is to say nothing of the province's century-long dependence on a petroculture that has both transformed and threatened life, in Quebec and across the globe.[24] Accidents like the Lac Mégantic fire represent crisis events in the fabric of our petroculture, but the entire post-industrial era is defined by hidden, more quotidian, dangers of our ever-expanding reliance on oil. Displacing the fires of violence so spectacularly onto a distant "elsewhere" belittles both the callous disregard for the effects of resource consumption that mark settler culture and the atrocities performed and still being performed on the North American continent, shifting the blame away from settler colonial policies and peoples. These three films, each beautifully made in its own way, relied on a common trope attributing fiery violence to a Muslim elsewhere, imagining Quebec under the sign of water, a peaceful contrast, both welcome and welcoming. The filmmakers were clearly not purposefully trying to elide violences at home, yet their films do precisely this, abstracting the province as a crystal of blue tranquility in a world on fire.

Biography

Julie-Françoise Tolliver is associate professor of world literature and cinema in the English Department at the University of Oklahoma. Her first book, *The Quebec Connection: A Poetics of Solidarity in Global Francophone Literatures* (University of Virginia Press, 2020), examines the textual connections linking French-language writers from Quebec, Africa, and the Caribbean from the 1950s through the 1970s. She is one of the contributors to *Quebec Cinema*

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2. See McAndrew and Bakhshaei, "The Difficult Integration of Muslims in Québec since 9/11".
3. Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*. Study Guide (2021), 3, https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/pub/discover.pdf (last accessed 9 June 2026).
4. The crucifix, which still appears in 2021 version of the pamphlet, was in fact removed from the Assemblée in 2019.
5. Henry Giroux, "Breaking into the Movies: Pedagogy and the Politics of Film," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21.3 (2001): 588.
6. Amy Cardinal Christianson, Colin Robert Sutherland, Faisal Moola, Noémie Gonzalez Bautista, David Young and Heather MacDonald, "Centering Indigenous Voices: The Role of Fire in the Boreal Forest of North America," *Current Forestry Reports* no. 8 (2022): 257–276. See also Michael Asch, "From Terra Nullius to Affirmation: Reconciling Aboriginal Rights with the Canadian Constitution," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 17.2 (2002): 23–39.
7. The first known suppression of fire by a government in Canada, for example, occurred in Newfoundland in 1610, when it was declared that "No person shall set fire in the woods." See Amy Christianson, "Social Science Research on Indigenous Wildfire Management in the 21st Century and Future Research Needs," *International Journal of Wildland Fire* no. 24 (2015): 191. See also Robin Wall Kimmerer and Frank Kanawha Lake, "The Role of Indigenous Burning in Land Management," *Journal of Forestry* 99.11 (2001): 36–41.
8. This short narrative of Canada's fire history is highly truncated and incomplete. For a much more detailed analysis, see Stephen J. Pyne, *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).
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10. Martine Ouellet and Guy Morneau, "Rapport: Analyse des événements liés aux feux de forêt de l'été 2013," Réseau d'expertise en conseil stratégique (March 2014), https://mrnf.gouv.qc.ca/nos-publications/analyse-des-evenements-lies-aux-feux-de-foret-de-lete-2013-rapport/ (last accessed 9 June 2026).
11. Wajdi Mouawad, *Incendies* (Montreal: Leméac, 2003).

12. Esther Pelletier and Irène Roy, "*Incendies*: Évoquer pour susciter l'imaginaire et montrer plutôt que dire," *Nouvelles études francophones* 30.2 (2015): 111.
13. Debbie Lynn Elias, "Exclusive 1:1 with *Incendies* Writer/Director Denis Villeneuve," *Behind the Lens* https://behindthelensonline.net/site/interviews/exclusive-11-with-incendies-writerdirector-denis-villeneuve/ (n.d.), last accessed 9 June 2026.
14. Évelyne de la Chenelière, *Bachir Lazhar* (Montreal: Leméac, 2002). Note that de la Chenelière's play spells the name "Bashir" with an "s" even as the filmmakers chose to spell "Bachir" with a "c."
15. Imed Labidi, "*Monsieur Lazhar*: The Ideal Immigrant in the Neoliberal Québécois Imagination," *The Journal of North African Studies* 20.3 (2015): 378.
16. Gada Mahrouse, Chantal Maillé and Daniel Salée, "*Monsieur Lazhar*: Exploring the Dis/Junctures Between Art and Life in Québec," *Québec Studies* no. 56 (fall/winter 2013): 13.
17. Nell Minow, "Interview: Philippe Falardeau of *Monsieur Lazhar*," *The Movie Mom Blog: A Parent's Eye on Media, Culture, and Values* (25 April 2012), https://moviemom.com/interview-philippe-falardeau-of-monsieur-lazhar/, last accessed 9 June 2026.
18. The journal *Parti pris* (1963–1968) and Pierre Vallières's *Nègres blancs d'Amérique: autobiographie précoce d'un "terroriste" québécois* (Montreal: Parti Pris, 1969) were instrumental in operating the shift toward understanding francophone Québécois people as colonized, which led to international solidarities with anticolonial struggles across the francophone world. See my book *The Quebec Connection: A Poetics of Solidarity in Global Francophone Literatures* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2020).
19. Minow, "Interview".
20. Falardeau acknowledges that this fear leads to policies of exclusion: "In the past ten years I'll have to admit that our policy has been aligned to the U.S. politics in the post 9/11 era—we've been closing our doors to immigrants and refugees" (Minow, "Interview").
21. Jimmy Johnson, "Palestinians Denied a Voice in Canadian Film Set in West Bank," *The Electronic Intifada* (23 September 2013), https://electronicintifada.net/content/palestinians-denied-voice-canadian-film-set-west-bank/12787, last accessed 9 June 2026.
22. Laura T. Ilea, "*Inch'Allah*: la honte et la 'géographie de l'affect,'" *Caietele Echinox* no. 32 (2017): 137.
23. This representation obfuscates the fact that "organizations like the Panthers yesterday or Hamas today function to provide daily services—food kitchens, garbage collection, health care, water inspection, and the like—in areas neglected by some official central government" (Fredric Jameson, "An American Utopia," *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army,* Slavoj Žižek, ed. (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016), 4.
24. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman, and Adam Carlson, "On Petrocultures: Or, Why We Need to Understand Oil to Understand Everything Else," *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson, eds. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).