

JE ME SOUVIENS

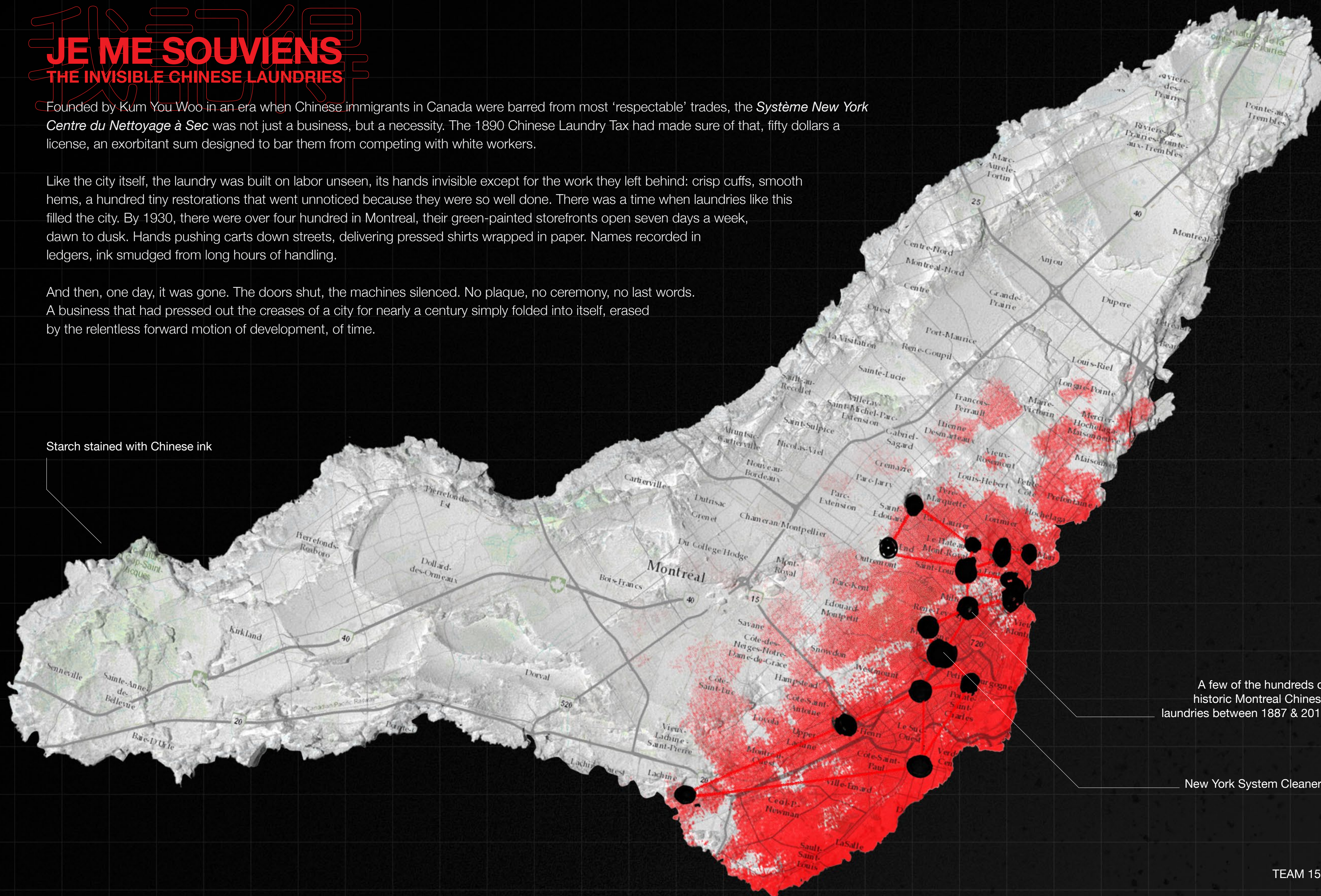
THE INVISIBLE CHINESE LAUNDRIES

Founded by Kum You Woo in an era when Chinese immigrants in Canada were barred from most 'respectable' trades, the *Système New York Centre du Nettoyage à Sec* was not just a business, but a necessity. The 1890 Chinese Laundry Tax had made sure of that, fifty dollars a license, an exorbitant sum designed to bar them from competing with white workers.

Like the city itself, the laundry was built on labor unseen, its hands invisible except for the work they left behind: crisp cuffs, smooth hems, a hundred tiny restorations that went unnoticed because they were so well done. There was a time when laundries like this filled the city. By 1930, there were over four hundred in Montreal, their green-painted storefronts open seven days a week, dawn to dusk. Hands pushing carts down streets, delivering pressed shirts wrapped in paper. Names recorded in ledgers, ink smudged from long hours of handling.

And then, one day, it was gone. The doors shut, the machines silenced. No plaque, no ceremony, no last words. A business that had pressed out the creases of a city for nearly a century simply folded into itself, erased by the relentless forward motion of development, of time.

Starch stained with Chinese ink



A few of the hundreds of historic Montreal Chinese laundries between 1887 & 2017

New York System Cleaners

To leave is to survive is to stay

First the language blends, then the name evolves
Hands learn new crafts, bodies grow roots
Yet culture blooms, traditions stay strong
Labour becoming legacy, proudly carried on.

A laundromat door swings open
Scent of starch and sweat
Leaking into the street

An uncle's hands, calloused by steam
Teaches Noah, to carry his own weight
That is, the weight of others

Lift the bundles, sort the colours,
Let the starch seep into his skin

History is not what remains
But what is carried forward
Pressed into fabric
Stitched between seams
only the workers can see

And now
This monument, a glass door, swinging
For bubble tea, LEDs pulsing against
The tiled floor where his uncle knelt

Now
A teen scrolling through memories
she's only starting to form
Leans against a counter where
His grandfather once laid out a shirt
And smoothed the collar
With both hands
I remember.

