

“WE SHOULDN’T BE AFRAID TO THINK SMALL”: ENGAGED ACCLIMATIZATION AS A RESEARCH PRINCIPLE IN AN ABORIGINAL CONTEXT

CAROLINE DESBIENS

Professor
Geography Department, Université Laval /
caroline.desbiens@ggr.ulaval.ca

IRÈNE HIRT

Researcher, Department of Geography
and Environment
University of Geneva / irene.hirt@unige.ch

COMITÉ PATRIMOINE ILNU

(Innu Heritage Committee),
Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan
Mashteuiatsh, Québec (Canada) /
stacy.bossum@mashteuiatsh.ca

INTRODUCTION

In an article published in 2012, Grimwood et al. proposed the concept of “engaged acclimatization” to describe a participatory research approach that is intended to be gradual in nature, highly practical, and based on the step-by-step building of a research relationship where academic and community partners find it of mutual interest to pool their efforts. We tested this approach in the context of a research project entitled “Tshishipiminu : occupation ilnu de la rivière Péribonka et développement hydroélectrique” (Tshishipiminu: Innu occupation of the Peribonka River and hydroelectric development). During their initial meeting, the partners—a Université Laval professor, a researcher from the University of Geneva, and members of the Comité patrimoine ilnu (Innu Heritage Committee) of Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan reflected on the nature and scope of the data collection. They came to the conclusion that—as opposed to the academic trend where research projects tend to keep growing in terms of the size of the teams and the amount of money invested—they shouldn’t be afraid to buck this trend, and to

“think small” instead. It seemed that, in order to implement an ethical and participatory approach, they had to reverse the usual order by beginning with some fairly modest and applied research which, if the partnership proved to be satisfactory, could potentially be expanded into a larger project. It was also a question of reducing the size of the research team while attempting to increase the number of people affected by the project’s spin-offs. In order to enact these principles, the partners pursued a common objective: that of producing an exhibition in the form of information panels in a relatively short period of time, that is, within two years. The text that follows summarizes our experience so as to identify and describe the practices that were found to be effective in terms of both the scientific quality of the results and the building of an equitable partnership.

TSHISHIPIMINU: THE CONTEXT

In the language of the people of Mashteuiatsh, *nehlueun* (a dialect of the Innu language), Tshishipiminu means “our river.” The watercourse at the heart of this research project has its source in the Otish mountains and crosses more than 450 kilometres before draining into Lac Saint-Jean. Whereas the river as a whole



is officially called the Peribonka, the Pekuakamiulnuatsh refer to it as Peli-paukau shipi (“where the water is cloudy”); several other place names stretching from its source to its mouth reflect the great variety of places and features that make up this living environment. The Peribonka is one of Québec’s most important heritage rivers: covering a surface area of 28,200 km², its drainage basin structures the practices and culture associated with the use of the canoe, and the language and economy of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh.

Despite its occupation by several generations of Pekuakamiulnuatsh, in the twentieth century the river became the central axis of a vast network of hydroelectric energy production on which the aluminium industry, among others, and thus a large part of the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region’s economic development were based (Girard and Perron 1995; Massell 2011). The first hydroelectric installations (Lac Manouane and the Passes-Dangereuses reservoir, which were the property of the Alcan corporation) date from the 1940s, while the latest dam (Péribonka IV, built by Hydro-Québec) was put into service in 2008. Consequently, the impact of hydroelectric development has extended over several generations and follows other phases of territorial appropriation, including those linked to the fur monopoly, the establishment of the townships, agricultural colonization, the creation of the Mashteuatsh reserve and, more recently, the emergence of regional county municipalities (RCMs).

Placing the rights and interests of Aboriginal peoples at the forefront, the goal of the Tshishipiminu research project is to document and publicize the way that the Pekuakamiulnuatsh have occupied the territory of the Peribonka River, and how, after the building of the hydroelectric dams and their associated infrastructures, the Pekuakamiulnuatsh adapted their territorial practices in order to maintain and revitalize them. Even though our research is based on other studies carried out over the past several decades (Brassard 1983; CAM 1979; Charest 1980), such a task may seem enormous; this is why, by scaling down the work, the members of the team were able to take it on.

RUSSIAN NESTING DOLLS

The first stage was to develop a smaller space of collaboration within an extended research structure. The Tshishipiminu project was in fact initially part of a much larger research context: that of the Tetawan CURA (Community-University Research Alliance) “Habiter le Nitassinan Mak Innu Assi – Paysages culturels, aménagement et gouvernance des milieux bâtis des collectivités innues du Québec” (Living in Nitassinan Mak Innu Assi—Cultural landscapes, development and governance of built environments in Québec Innu communities), which brought together regional land-use planning and development specialists and practitioners in the fields of architecture, planning, geography, anthropology, etc., coming from Innu communities and from a number of postsecondary institutions. The goal of the work connected with the Tetawan CURA was “to design a sustainable and

culturally appropriate built environment that is also oriented towards an increased autonomy in the development and management of housing”¹ [*our translation*]. Starting from the fact that hydroelectric development represents an entry point for understanding the spatial dynamics of reduction (Aboriginal) and expansion (non-Aboriginal)—as well as Aboriginal strategies to counter this destructuring of their ancestral lands—our work was part of the CURA research theme entitled “Cultural landscapes and representation.” The objective was to develop a multidimensional profile of the evolution of Innu cultural landscapes.

In both Québec and Canada, anyone involved in research in the Aboriginal context would have been quite familiar with the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) program offered by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), which was designed to encourage closer ties between community and practice milieus and academic and research spheres. Based on a knowledge mobilization approach, the aim of the program was to link up various local-scale actors possessing an in-depth understanding of their communities’ needs and priorities with academic researchers, who are generally associated with extensive knowledge production and transfer networks. So, by linking up various milieus and scales of analysis, the objective of the CURA program was to foster the development of innovative approaches, strategies and solutions to questions and issues connected with very specific contexts. Despite the fact that, after

1. Tetawan CURA: <http://www.tetawan.org/a-propos>. Accessed August 18, 2014.

roughly a decade of existence, the CURA program is no longer part of the SSHRC's programming, it did help to set up a partnership-oriented research culture in many social science disciplines: its spirit and methods can still be found in the funding opportunities offered today, which testifies to the paradigm shift that has gradually been developing in Canada.

Although the CURA program clearly represented an advance from the viewpoint of the implementation of research ethics, many researchers have encountered stumbling blocks in the practical application of this program. With regards to our own experience, one of these issues was that of a real democratization of the research process: a very difficult task, given the size of the Tetuan CURA. For the past several years, and in the course of reflection on the ethics of research in the Aboriginal milieu—and especially, in Québec, the ethics highlighted with the publication of the *First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Research Protocol* (APNQL 2014)—it has become apparent that this democratization might be perceived differently by academic and community milieus. Whereas many academic researchers have often focused on developing better strategies for the dissemination and appropriation of research results by potential “users” at the end of the data collection and analysis process, community milieus generally perceive their involvement as the starting point, and not the end point, of any research process that concerns them.

Without denying the advances that have been made in the ethics of research in the Aboriginal context, many inconsistencies still remain in this area: while most social science researchers now adhere to the principles of “Ownership, control, access and possession” (OCAP) (Schnarch 2004), we need to be aware that applying these principles requires that local partners be involved at every stage of a research project, from its design to dissemination of the findings. Indeed, how can a community control an approach that it has not helped to define, based on its own tools and priorities, or supported in the various phases of its implementation? We ourselves quickly found that such an approach could not be achieved without close ties established, developed and maintained by a small team of people with the professional capacities and personal desire to commit to a common path, and for a sufficient period of time (Desbiens 2010).

Such a commitment cannot be shared in the same way by all of the people and institutions associated with a structure as vast as a CURA. Indeed, by nature, a CURA—or any other research structure based on the model of a network—often tends toward a widening of the circle, somewhat akin to the image of the waves generated by a stone thrown into a body of water. There are many advantages to such an outward reach of the network: the coming into contact with new actors; the multiplication of viewpoints; the diversification of knowledge; the raising of the awareness of a wider public; etc. However, such a strategy can sometimes lead to the weake-

ning of the interpersonal and human ties that are in fact at the basis of a research project, if the project is envisioned as a relationship first and foremost. In order to counter the problem of the weakening of ties between too many or too many different types of actors in a structure that could potentially grow indefinitely, the Tshishipiminu project opted for the drawing of a smaller circle. Although porous in nature, this circle proved to be a space of action that was just large enough to act in a direct and effective manner. The image of Russian nesting dolls describes this strategy quite well: as part of a potentially expandable whole, we formed a much smaller circle of people, places and approaches and thus regained the closeness needed for building and maintaining a good research relationship.

A SMALL PROJECT WITH EXPANSIVE INTERFACES

Working with a small team and fewer means clearly affected the way that the research was performed, especially in terms of the data collection. The Tshishipiminu project did not claim to carry out “exhaustive” research but rather sought to find “expressive” ways of presenting the experience of the transformation of the land through hydroelectric development, as experienced by members of the Mashteuiatsh community. In order to go beyond the simple collecting of data and to instead see the collection/appropriation/dissemination activities as a “wheel in motion,” the primary objective of the research was to produce a “panel” exhibition. The archival research began in the spring of 2011; the interviews were conducted in the

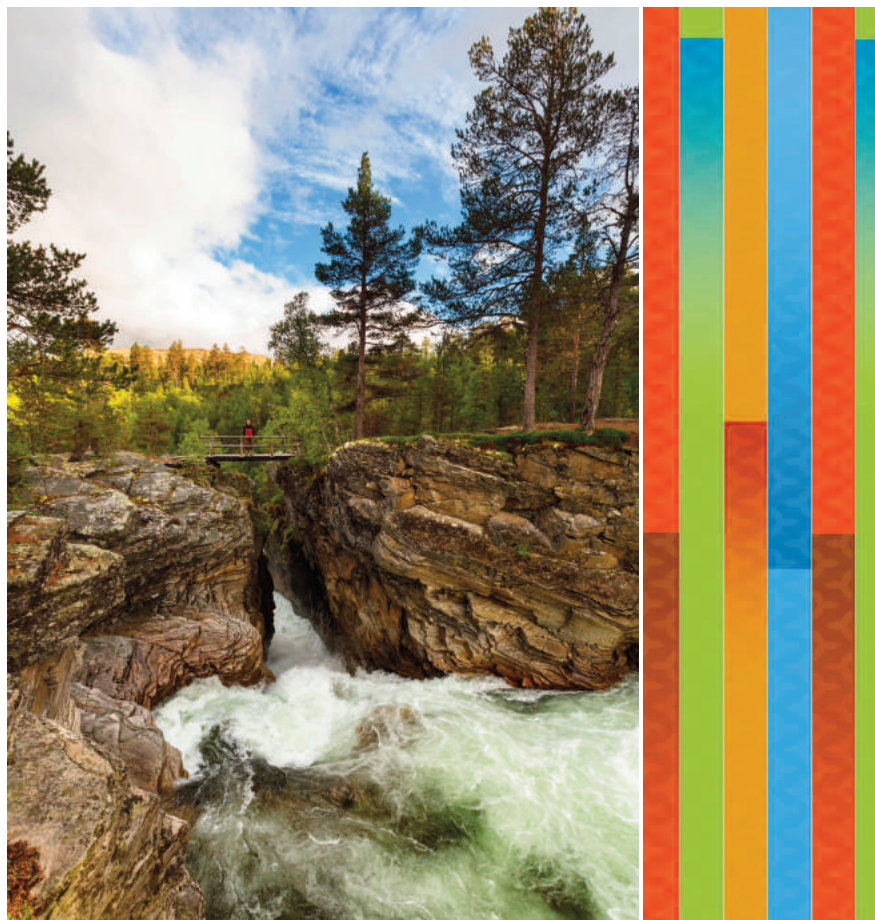


summers of 2011 and 2012; and the data analysis occurred in the fall of 2012 and winter of 2013 and continued with the designing of the panels from March to October 2013, culminating with the presentation of the exhibition *Tshishipiminu : occupation ilnu de la rivière Péribonka et développement hydroélectrique* (Tshishipiminu: Innu occupation of the Peribonka River and hydroelectric development) at the Mash-teuiatsh Native Museum from November 2013 to March 2014.

The interview process was conceived and planned together with the various partners, with the idea of involving people in the community who wanted to learn about interview techniques. Since an Aboriginal candidate could not be found at the time, this role was ultimately taken on by one of the researchers. In terms of the production of the exhibition, it is important to mention that it was designed as a fully-fledged research “method”—that is, a working approach—before being simply a means of dissemination. There were several reasons for adopting this approach. First, the exhibition made it possible to establish a very concrete frame of reference for the data collection, in order to curb the researchers’ undoubtedly professionally-conditioned tendency to accumulate data without regard for the constraints of data processing or dissemination to publics other than academic ones. Secondly, the exhibition acted as a filter and a common thread for selecting the appropriate themes, and hierarchizing and formatting the information. In this approach,

the reception of the work by the people of Mashteuiatsh was necessarily at the forefront of the choices made in terms of how to represent the information: for example, who is speaking in this exhibition?² Which topics are likely to appeal to people? How can a proper balance be maintained between what is included and what is not included? Which themes should be avoided, and so on? In this regard, we soon learned, for example, that some aspects of the research might carry a heavy emotional

load for some members of the Mash-teuiatsh community, especially for families who lost their hunting and trapping territories when the most recent dam became operational in 2008 (Péribonka IV). Moreover, some aspects, such as people’s spiritual relationship with the land, might be of an intimate and private nature. It was therefore necessary to look together at which aspects could or could not be presented in the exhibition and, as the case may be, find the best ways of presenting the material.



2. We are grateful to Élisabeth Kaine, a professor and researcher at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, for having made us aware of the importance of this question.

Thirdly, the exhibition served as an end point, a mandatory rendez-vous, as it were, for work that—like any research—could have gone on indefinitely. It allowed us to rapidly disseminate the preliminary findings and, based on community members' comments and reactions, to determine the next stages of the project. This exercise also allowed us to clarify the roles of the various actors involved in the research (academic and community researchers, knowledge holders, heritage specialists, administrators, linguists, an archivist, a museologist, a cartographer, etc.) in order to define and consolidate the best possible structure for the pursuit of the partnership. The engaged acclimatization stage indeed proved to be a positive one, and the partners expressed the desire to continue with the work.

Ultimately, this small project nonetheless enabled us to determine the most promising interfaces for the future growth of the project. The toponymy of the Peribonka River in particular emerged as a theme that should be prioritized and linked up with work already under way in Mashteuiatsh. In this respect, participatory map-making could be another fruitful means of data collection. Similarly, the highlighting of heritage sites could lead to other initiatives, including heritage sites visits and discussions with the authorities in charge of the dams in order to increase access to the river for the Pekuakamiulnuatsh. In documenting another episode of the territorial appropriation of the Nitassinan (territory) of Mashteuiatsh, the project also adds other

perspectives on the evolution and development of the areas that are currently the focus of the territorial negotiations that have been under way since the signing of the Entente de principe d'ordre général (EPOG (Agreement-in-Principle of a General Nature) in 2004.

Another important lead that should be pursued is the promotion of the cultural visibility of the people of Mashteuiatsh on their Nitassinan. A brochure of the exhibition is currently being prepared, and the panels will be exhibited in other innu communities and regional museums, in parallel with the holding of various educational activities and events aimed at the sharing of information and exchanges with the general public. The work accomplished could also serve as the basis for the production of other information panels to be installed in strategic locations on the territory or to ultimately become part of viewing areas (belvederes) integrated into the hydroelectric facilities. Although a new application for funding from the SSHRC is planned, it should be noted that if there were to be no further funding, all of these extensions of the Tshishipiminu project could be carried out by using the means already available, and a little creativity, of course. This leads us to believe that, beyond the sums invested and the infrastructures mobilized, the time and personal investment of the researchers involved undoubtedly represent the most important capital for the continuation of the work (Desbiens 2012).

CONCLUSION: ON THE SOCIAL AND SCIENTIFIC VALUE OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND COMMUNITIES

A few years before the widespread critical reflection on the role of the researcher and the ethics of research involving humans, the American science philosopher Donna Haraway warned us about the illusion of objectivity, which she referred to as the "god trick" often deployed by academic researchers: that is, the aspiration to see and know everything "from nowhere," in other words, without being observed oneself. Also noting the excesses of radical relativism, she proposed a middle ground, interwoven with connections: "We don't want to theorize the world, much less act within it, in terms of Global Systems, but we do need an earthwide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated—communities" (Haraway 1988: 580). Haraway goes on to specify that: "The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of *webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology*" (Haraway 1988: 584, our italics). In emphasizing the concept of "situated knowledge," all of Haraway's work asks a very pertinent question, which is: "How should one be positioned in order to see?" (1988: 588). In the context of the Tshishipiminu project, there is no doubt that it is the academic researchers' positioning within the social universe of Mashteuiatsh, at all stages of

the project, that fostered not only the positive reception of the research, but also the quality of the data produced. Our experience testifies to the fact that, as well as applying the principles of ethics, respect, equity, reciprocity and collaboration, participatory research is a structured method that enhances the scientific value of a project.

For her part, Québec anthropologist Carole Lévesque underlines another fundamental aspect of any collaborative research process, which is the idea of “living together”: “Research activities [are] a component of the idea of living together. From this perspective, one can talk about the co-production of knowledge as a tool for social change” (Lévesque 2012: 294) [our translation]. But she is careful to note that one needs to be able to distinguish between two current tendencies:

Two main stances seem to be currently emerging from this new dynamics of interaction between academia and society: the first, more deterministic, position is tied to the objective of demonstrating the relevance of academic research based on its findings, and of promoting these findings. The second, more integrated, stance proposes that we review the very process of creating scientific knowledge. The terms of the rapprochement vary, depending on whether academia wants to inform and instruct society about its own accomplishments, or whether, on the contrary, it works together with society on shared and socially grounded issues. (Lévesque 2012: 291) [our translation]

With regards to the ethics of Aboriginal research, what stands out here is the importance of putting researchers back in their place, as it were: that is, of acknowledging their (often very fictitious) hold over the modes of production and validation of knowledge, and putting them back into the social, political and cultural universe of which their knowledge is a part. Having the courage to “think small” represents one more step towards democratizing research and the products of this research. This enables a “collective intelligence” (Lévy 2003) to emerge, which, because it is the fruit of everyone’s contributions, belongs, by this very fact, to a greater number of people.