

COMMEMORATING FLOODED CULTURAL SPACES: RESEARCH AS A LEVERAGE FOR COMMUNITY ACTION

INTERVIEW WITH JUSTINE GAGNON, DOCTORAL STUDENT IN GEOGRAPHY AT UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL, AND ADÉLARD BENJAMIN, PROJECT MANAGER FOR THE TERRITORY AND RESOURCES SECTOR, CONDUCTED ON AUGUST 29, 2018

GENESIS OF THE PROJECT “NITSHISSITUTEN: MEMORY AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY OF PESSAMIULNUAT IN FLOODED TERRITORIES”

In 2013, Justine Gagnon had finished her doctoral studies and was working with her director, Caroline Desbiens, on the completion of the project Tshishipiminu: Innu occupation of the Peribonka River and hydroelectric development, a research partnership between Université Laval and Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan. One of Justine's tasks was to present the traveling exhibit produced within the framework of this research partnership in other Innu communities. At that time, Justine's doctoral project was not yet defined but she was toying with the idea of developing a research project like the one in which she was collaborating with Professor Desbiens, to be led this time by the Pessamit community.

During the traveling exhibit in Pessamit, Justine met Éric Canapé, counselor for the Pessamit Band Council and in charge of the Territory and Resources

sector. During this first contact, Éric Canapé demonstrated an interest in Justine's ideas; he invited her to develop her doctoral project and submit it formally to the Council. Shortly afterwards, Justine was in Pessamit to present the traveling exhibit. She therefore took the opportunity to meet with the Band Council and share her intention of collaborating with the community.

I made the proposal to document cultural spaces that had been flooded with the construction of the dams. Initially, I had planned to consider only the dam on the Manicouagan River. To this, the community replied that it would be more interesting to document the cultural spaces of the three rivers harnessed on Nitassinan : the Betsiamites and aux Outardes Rivers, as well as the Manicouagan River. They were interested in the elders' knowledge of the whole hydrographic network. After the presentation, a resolution was adopted by the Council stipulating that the community accepts the collaboration. (Justine Gagnon)

This resolution marks the beginning of an evolving collaboration, entrenched in research as well as in showcasing

Innu cultural heritage and knowledge. This was part of the development of a series of research collaborations initiated by the team of the Territory and Resources sector during the 2000's, with the notable participation of Adélar Benjamin, who exercised the functions of counsellor for the Band Council from 2000 to 2014.

Parallel to and in support of the political representation work, the Territory and Resources sector had begun collaboration initiatives with the universities, more particularly with Université Laval's Chair of Aboriginal Forestry... The goal of research collaborations was to integrate into our practices the tools of non-Indigenous society for the development of the territory, the Nitassinan. Furthermore, we continued our community consultations work with elders to know their visions, aspirations, and concerns relative to territorial development. "Two visions" now available to us, so to speak, we hoped to make progress in the recognition of our prerogatives and the relevance of our perspectives, especially for resource development to be sustainable. (Adélar Benjamin)

COLLECTION: AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN FOR EVERYONE

During the summer of 2015, Justine returned to Pessamit with the objective of conducting a first series of interviews. Meanwhile, another research piloted by the Mamuitun Tribal Council (MTC) in partnership with the Emergency Architects is ongoing in the community. The Kushpitaou project, initiated by Robin St-Onge and Cimon Picard, both employees of the MTC, also involved data collection in the form of interviews with elders. In this context, Éric Canapé suggested to Justine and the MTC team to do their interviews together, to avoid overly soliciting the elders.

Plans had not been made this way, but we chose to follow his suggestion and optimize the time dedicated by the elders to these discussions. Finally, this worked well; our questions were often similar. It was an interesting experience; many ideas were shared around the room! (Justine Gagnon)

Following an initial processing of collected data, Justine was back the following year in 2015 to conduct a new series of interviews with five key informants recognized as knowledge-keepers in the community. At this time, it was to go more in-depth for the themes discussed the year before but this time with the availability of a new tool to propel the research into fertile ground: aerial photos of the rivers taken before the construction of dams. True, during the first phase, the discussions were based on maps produced after the construction of the dams and where it was



Interview held in collaboration with the members of the Innu Council, members of the Mamuitun Tribal Council and the Emergency Architects (photo taken by a member of the Emergency Architects, summer 2015)

impossible to see what the elders were talking about. With the photos, the islands and portages they talk about are easily identifiable.

During a first interview, when the elders say: "There was an island here", or here "there was a portage", it wasn't easy to see the exact location or the scope of what they were talking about. (Justine Gagnon)

Much like a window on the past, these photos really stimulated the discussions from both sides. Justine's collaborators who were doing the interviews in Innu, including Adélar and Sébastien Picard, felt particularly privileged in having access to all this knowledge provided by the elders.

For us, it was quite interesting because we learned things that we had never heard of about the rivers, sites, and portages. It was unbelievable since we could have access to stories that the parents and grandparents of bearers of knowledge told them about events or spaces on the territory, and that our parents didn't tell us. (Adélar Benjamin)

One of these stories that generated a lot of interest is that of an Innu fort built on one of these islands on the Pimpuakan (which became the Pimpuacan reservoir on the Betsiamites River), that more particularly served as a protection against the Iroquoians. According to the elders' stories, in this Innu fort there were many artifacts that were unfortunately submerged forever. Even though it is impossible to have access to these to learn more about the defence modes of the Innu ancestors in a war situation, the discovery of this segment of their history was a revelation for Adélar and Sébastien.

For us, to hear all this segment of our history was a surprising discovery. With my brothers and friends, we still talk about it today; it's a source of pride. Without a doubt, our ancestors were peaceful, but they defended themselves and they had knowledge about that.
(Adélaré Benjamin)

For Justine who attended these discussions, the experience was formative. To see how these links were created around the elders' stories, even without being able to understand them, was fascinating and encouraged her even further in her desire to do more than a doctoral thesis with the stories compiled.

REWRITE THE HISTORY OF THE NITASSINAN HYDROGRAPHIC NETWORK FROM THE INNU PERSPECTIVE: THE UAMASHTAKAN PROJECT

As the consultations and meetings progressed in the community and with the elders, the research collaborators realized that it was necessary to develop a product, an initiative to multiply the concrete spin-offs resulting from the update of elders' knowledge. This is how the Uamashtakan project emerged, a project to showcase the cultural heritage of the Manicouagan River.

With the collaboration of designer Géraldine Laurendeau, Adélaré Benjamin, Sébastien Picard, Éric Canapé, and others that have become involved since, we developed a project for a lookout point that would be built close to the Manic-5 dam. This name was chosen for the project because there was a waterfall before the construction of the dam. Around this area was one of the longest portages of the Manicouagan River; Uamashtakan means "to make a long contour". Though the waterfall no longer exists, a portion of this portage is visible in the forest on the other side of the river. Two burial places are still there. Practically, the lookout would point to the landscape where the past portage started and tell the river's story from the Innu perspective, thus facilitating the transfer of the knowledge shared by the elders. (Justine Gagnon)

Portion of the Uamashtakan portage site (Photo taken by Justine Gagnon, spring 2016).



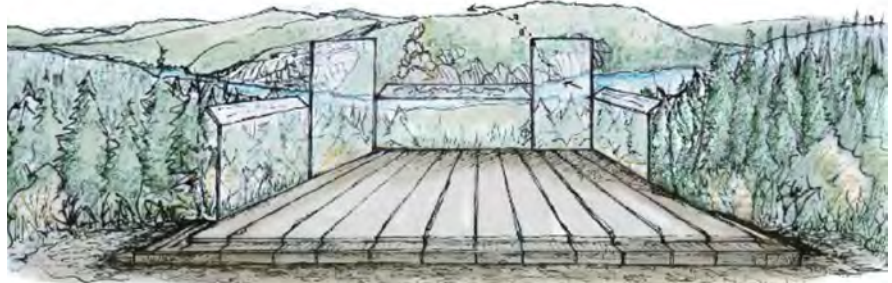
◀ Burial place on the Uamashtakan portage site (Photo taken by Justine Gagnon, spring 2016).

Panoramic view at the future lookout (Photo taken by Géraldine Laurendeau, spring 2016). ▼

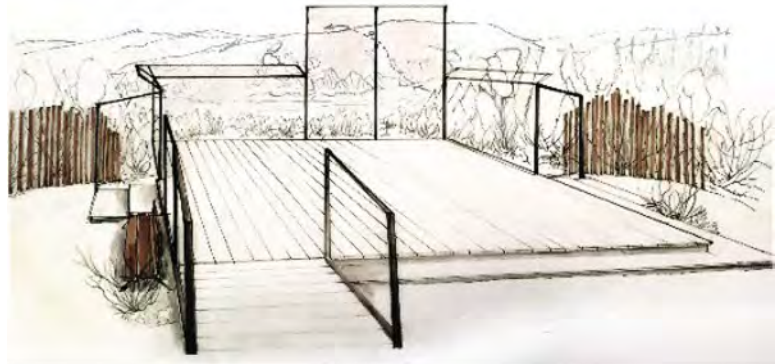


At the current time, the collaborators are actively seeking funding to achieve this project. During a preliminary phase, an exhibition aiming to present the Umashtakan project to the people of the community was presented at the community centre thanks to the contribution of the DIALOG Network. According to the book of comments at the event, the whole community supports its achievement.

A project such as the Umashtakan allows the youth to learn and know about segments of their own history, as well as that of their families and communities. They therefore become conscious of all the changes that took place on their territory during the last 60 years. For the elders who recall times before the dams, this is a unique opportunity to share the knowledge that they alone possess. In general, people are surprised by the results of the research since it was unthinkable to have access to tools such as maps of the flooded areas. It's as if the collaboration work with Justin contributed to connect us with our past. (Adélar Benjamin)



Drawing of the future lookout, by Géraldine Laurendeau (2016)



Drawing of the future lookout, by Géraldine Laurendeau (2016)

Ideally, this lookout would constitute an experience that would be repeated for each of the three rivers. This would result in a type of network of lookouts aiming to showcase Innu knowledge and heritage related to the Nitassinan rivers, thus rewriting the history of the territory.

These three large rivers were utilized by our parents, our ancestors. For us, these rivers, we often repeat it, were utilized as highways. At one point, in the history of the Province of Québec, the Quiet Revolution took place, bringing in its wake dams on our rivers - highways - sometimes completely taking away from us our connections

with the territory, without so much as remotely considering our advice and perspectives. The Umashtakan project is one way among others to assert who we are. We were here before the dams and before colonization. And we are still her. (Adélar Benjamin)

Since she documents the Innu stories related to the flooded territories, the collaboration between the Pessamit community and Justine encouraged not only the transfer of ancestral knowledge, but also the work for the defence and exercise of the community's rights on Nitassinan.

LONG-TERM SPIN-OFFS OF RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS: THE PROLIFERATION OF CAPACITIES TO ACT FOR THE COMMUNITY'S BENEFIT

Bringing together many people from distinct horizons for a project, when done in a spirit of reciprocity, can constitute an opportunity for collaborators to foresee new potentialities to meet emerging needs, and even engaging in new training programs to better serve the present and the future of the community. Justine and Adélarde illustrate this point in the following words:

The Umashtakan project has sown a seed. The teachings and skills acquired throughout the experience are now led by the members of the community. These members will mobilize them to create something else. For example, a new project for a boardwalk telling the story of the mouth of the Pessamit River is currently underway. When we observe the route undertaken and the objectives of this new project, we see similarities with the project. The same willingness to share the stories about the territory is present. The Umashtakan project experience could also encourage people to be trained in different specialties related to the enhancement of the heritage. We hope that one day an Innu will become an archeologist. The conditions for our wishes to come true are coming together, progressively...