



Mapping memories in a flooded landscape: A place reenactment project in Pessamit (Quebec)

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ABSTRACT

During the 1960s and 70s, many Indigenous communities across Quebec (Canada) faced the expansion of hydroelectric development on their ancestral lands. Claimed by the Québécois to be among their biggest technological achievements, the huge dams built on the province's main rivers created new cultural landscapes that Indigenous peoples could not relate to, since the topography they were familiar with was completely transformed. A lot of places they used to inhabit and cherish disappeared under the large reservoirs the dams created. Drawing upon a PhD research project led in collaboration with the Innu community of Pessamit (on the Quebec North Shore), this paper focuses on the recollection of geographical memories through cultural mapping and storytelling. Shared by the elders during qualitative interviews, narratives relating past journeys along the rivers revealed how deep the connection is between geography and memory and to what extent remembering may constitute a way of *inhabiting* lost landscapes.

1. Introduction

Sitting around a table covered with different maps, Edgar, an elder from the Pessamit community and myself (Justine), are looking attentively the Innu Nation's ancestral land, trying to imagine how it looked like before hydroelectricity facilities were built on the three main rivers Innu people used as canoeing highways to reach their hunting grounds, situated in the Northern parts of the territory.¹

Are there any places of importance that have been flooded after the Manic-5 dam was built on the Manicouagan river in 1970? I ask him.

Hmmm, this is pretty hard to identify on this map, he says. Actually we would need another map with a different scale. Even better, we should go directly on site and I will show you.

Pointing at the map, he continues: Here, you see, there were many trees before, but then when the reservoir overflows, they open the valve and let the excess of water flow over the land. Because of that, there are no traces left from the portage we used to call *Uamashatakan*, a word that signify 'where you have to get around, to

bypass'. Because of the waterfall that was standing there, we couldn't go through in our canoes. We had to portage around it. But we went there a few years ago with a guy from the land and resources office and we found a small section of the old portage, around here, as well as the remains of an old grave. For someone who knew this place before, it is still possible to imagine where it was approximately (Fig. 1).

And why is this place significant to you? I ask.

Actually, it is one of the longest portages on the Manicouagan River. Innu people used to walk around 8 or 9 km to bypass the big waterfall. When we were carrying our stuff, we had to walk about 1,5km, after that we would go back to get other stuff and so on. One time we took one week to go through it with my family. That's probably why people used to say that it was one of the longest portages. But everyone always got through and we never had any problems. There was always mutual assistance between families. When you were done with your own material, you would go help the others to bring theirs.

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¹ Created as a reserve between 1851 and 1861, Pessamit is one of the 9 Innu communities forming Quebec's Innu First Nation which, at the time of writing, numbers approximately 16 820 members in total. Located on the North Shore, about 60 km south of Baie-Comeau, the Pessamit community has a population of ± 3600 people, with 780 members living outside the village (see Fig. 2). The Pessamiulnuat (the Innus of Pessamit) have been intimately – and to a large extent, forcibly – linked to the economic development of Quebec through hydroelectricity since the 1950s. It should be noted, however, that their ancestral occupation has never been formerly recognized by the federal and provincial governments. When the Manic-Bersimis-Outarde complex was built, some families got a small compensation (around 100\$ per family), an insignificant amount compared to the equipment, hunting territories, and economic activities and resources they lost access to.



Fig. 1. Panoramic view, taken from the opposite side of the river, of the hill that the old portage would cross over. On the left part of the picture is the area where the excess water flows.

While I listen to Edgar's story, I look toward this little spot on the map, but the only thing I can see is the Manic-5 dam and the huge reservoir it has created. Personally, I am so used to see this topography that I can barely imagine the past landscapes Edgar is talking about. Moreover, I am part of the society that built the dam and claimed this land to be theirs at the time. This was supposed to be one of the Québécois' biggest achievements in the 1960s, a brilliant technological feat able to transform Quebec into a modern state.

Did people lose some camps or equipment because of the flooding? I ask Edgar.

My family's traditional land is just there, directly in the middle of the actual reservoir. I was born there in 1935 and we had about 4 camps. In total, on this part of the land, there were maybe 10 camps and on a larger scale, I would say a hundred, like a small village. There were also graves, but most of them were repatriated before the flood. But we lost our traps, our tents. We had some traplines and people would leave their traps all year long so, obviously, they now lie underwater.²

According to Edgar, when the dam was built on the Manicouagan River, the area that is now the reservoir filled with water pretty fast because the old river was very narrow in some places. When he went back after the flooding, he could not recognize his own land. Clearly, the discussion we are having has a deep emotional resonance. His family has never been able to go back to these lands after the dam was built, while other community members literally refused to return in a familiar place they could no longer recognize, as another elder outlined: "Before the flood, it was a beautiful lake. My mother never wanted to go back and see her land after that, because it was changed completely. 'This is not my land', she used to say".³

2. Remembering past geographies in a flooded landscape

These exchanges with Edgar and other people from Pessamit have led us to question, among other things, how place attachment can survive when these places are gone or when they are not accessible anymore. How does memory work to recall or rebuild *localized* events or emotions when the remembering subject cannot stand *in-place* anymore? In this paper we explore these issues drawing from phenomenological approaches in geography and memory studies. First, we

propose to look deeper into the Innus' remembered cultural heritage: using the concept of "memory frame" (Casey, 2000), we explore what this remembering is made of and what kind of role it plays in contemporary life. Secondly, we reflect on what our research partners view as culturally appropriate commemorative practices. Since the very beginning, our collaborators' needs and concerns have been at the center of the project. Thanks to several stays in Pessamit – from 4 days to 2 weeks each time – Justine also had the opportunity to develop close ties with some of the community's members. Inspired by an approach of "engaged acclimatization", we opted as much as possible for an "embodied and reflexive knowledge production, occurring through immersive encounters" (Grimwood et al., 2012: 214) with the material, political and cultural context of the Pessamiulnuat. Every research step has thus been planned and realized *with* our partners, through interaction, co-reflection and respectful practices. We wanted to make sure that the ideas and methodological tools suggested were truly relevant for them. Through this engagement, we have come to understand that cultural and participatory mapping can be a relevant tool to support and trigger the remembering process, while enhancing the Innus' visibility on their own lands, even in the flooded areas. Indeed, the ultimate objective of our on-going research is to design and install viewing platforms in strategic locations where the Innus' past geographies, and the sense of place associated with them, can come to the fore.

This remembering of past places unfolds in a geographical context where, over the last fifty years, the Pessamiulnuat have seen their land radically transformed by hydroelectricity facilities and other forms of resources extraction (Charest, 2008; Desbiens, 2013; Massel, 2011). While logging and mining operations have also impacted the Pessamiulnuat's way of life, the implementation of hydroelectricity facilities along North Shore rivers has been particularly disruptive. As Desbiens (2013) explains, the intertwining of national affirmation and resources extraction during the 1960s, has contributed to the separation of these environments from their local Indigenous cultures. Quebec's hydroelectricity development thus functions as a multiform process of erasure; the creation of large reservoirs submerged significant portions of the Innus' lands, but the building of a national narrative – rooted in a colonial representation of space as *terra nullius* – also contributed to the invisibilising of the Pessamiulnuat's cultural heritage.

Heritage preservation thus raises numerous challenges for the Pessamiulnuat considering the now intangible nature and physical inaccessibility of this heritage, and the fact that there are few remaining storytellers that have been in contact with key cultural sites before they were submerged. Yet, for the Innus, commemoration solely in terms of loss is not necessarily appropriate nor desirable. In a paper about the politics of describing Indigenous people as ghostly or haunting

² Edgar St-Onge, interviewed in July 2015 in Pessamit, Quebec.

³ Joseph-Louis Vachon, interviewed in July 2015 in Pessamit, Quebec.

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