## **MULTIPLE VOICES**

# Expression of the Founding Principles of Autochthony

An evocative and sensitive literary work, to better understand and appreciate Aboriginal cultures. A rallying and unifying writing of multiple voices expressing in their own way what defines and characterizes "being Aboriginal" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## **PREFACE**

As part of the development of the permanent exhibition *This Is Our Story:* First Nations and Inuit in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century of the Musée de la civilisation de Québec, La Boîte Rouge vif carried out a consultation tour from 2010 to 2013 which enabled the meeting of hundreds of people living in nearly twenty communities of Quebec.

The exceptional wealth of the material collected during the consultations inspired

La Boîte Rouge vif in the creation of additional dissemination tools

complementary to the exhibition.

More than sixty themes were discussed by the people participating in the consultation. As part of a creative exercise, some Aboriginal authors were asked to write a creative piece expressing one or more themes by drawing inspiration from the accounts shared. This present publication presents a collection of these original texts, incorporating statements deriving from the consultations. It seeks to highlight the founding principles introducing to this view the world according to the First Peoples.

As if by magical vitalism, life guides each and every one towards a pathway of communication, towards different forms of expression in an attempt to give form to what remains alive in the centre of one's chest. No matter how one describes them, how one externalizes them, our origins seep through our bones.

It is this combination of memory and history, roots and acculturation, that bubbles in these bodies that are ours, in these bodies that shape the present with their paths.

Marie-Andrée Gill

## **PROLOGUE**

The past tells us a story. This story is white. It transpires submission. As they say, colonial mentality in the face of savagery. A few pictures here and there, in a Quebec history textbook. Native Americans growing corn, the others, nomads who hunt and gather. Animal skins on their shoulders and shaman healers. Cone-shaped tents, others in the shape of semicircles and longhouses, in which we lived by the dozen. The imaginary just stands there, observing lifestyles significantly different from those civilized. Often the story does not reveal any more.

We wish to take a look at the story, not as a distant disappointment, but rather as being part of it, as having taken part in its development. The story we wish to share with you, is no longer only white, it takes place inland, at sea and within men. The aim is try to look at who we are and to accept where we come from. This story has flaws and it also has incredible power, resilience and temerity. Its main purpose; a desire for change.

We want to resolve collective amnesia. Tell. Share. Translate into reality. Withstand the test of time. Accompany the world's affairs. Establish a foothold. To recreate a *we* to populate the present territories, these territories that made us.

This we which we wish to shout out, this we in turmoil in which we carry all fragmented hopes. This we whom we are trying to tame.

To experience diversity again that now resides within us.

#### THE TERRITORY

There are hard to break ties, one-hundred-year-old trees, rooted and strong, impossible to kill. The bond unifying our nations to nature is as such. One might think that they were born from imagination, from wild unconsciousness, naive of the First Peoples. However, these bonds are real, steeped in history and in the former life of nomads.

Our cultures are expressed in our commitment to our traditional ways of life and in our ways of living and thinking. Values such as respect, mutual support and sharing are prominent in our communities and several words of our languages bear witness to that. In the past, people were united by community spirit; there was no life without it. We established our traditional living spaces with family, where we wanted to see our children grow, in a place where we felt connected and in harmony. But even if we no longer live in traditional territory, it is within us, rooted by thousands of years of occupation.

The territory is the cradle of Aboriginal nations; our culture, our history, our language, our spirituality, our lifestyle as well as our identity are one with it. The territory is tradition and customs. Nowadays, we occupy the territory differently but it is where we draw our strength, our courage, our perseverance to continue to

defend our rights, our language, our culture and our own independent way of doing.

Ultimately, if there was one permanent feature, it would probably be this simple thing, which more than anything, we try to transmit and sustain: this form of sensitivity to natural elements and the close relationship it maintains with the stability of all things, within this vast circle in which we are all evolving, nature, man or beast.

Originally, it was thus foolish for us to think of owning things, land, elements. We see ourselves as a component of the universe and not a separate entity within it: we have no power over the other components other than to negotiate with them our place and our relationships. No living being is superior to another; each one is essential where it is. The water and the land do not belong to us, just like wampum belts do not belong to their guardian, the latter's mandate is to protect them and pass them on.

For us, wandering into the woods is like entering our house.

For the Cree, the word "house" does not exist because the place where we find ourselves becomes the home. Your house is always the same, no matter where you live. You're always at home, no matter where you are on the territory.

Kevin Brousseau, Eeyou (Cree)

The territory in its entirety serves us as shelter, drugstore, pantry, we can live in and with this territory, our identity is deeply linked to it. This explains why the protection of the environment and the importance of water are deeply rooted in our traditions. This resource is vital for us not only for food and raw materials but also because our traditional medicine uses certain animal parts. The waterways are our roads and our pantry; therefore we must take great care of them.

Anytime we take from Mother Earth, we're supposed to give something back. We don't just take things for free; we need to give something back to her. We believe that a plant has a spirit as well, just like we do. We're no more important than that plant is on this earth, and we're treated as equals. If this plant is willing to give up its life to help us as a human being, we need to be grateful for that. A lot of the spiritual element refers to this and it's this spiritual element that enhances medicine.

Della Adams, Kahien'kehá:ka (Mohawk)

It is easy to forget how difficult this way of life was. Exhausting, grueling. A continual race for subsistence. Primary needs sometimes difficult to meet. The dry winter and famines that follow one another. The bitter cold which kills the weak. Babies who die after their first breath because of poor sanitary conditions and

mothers who perish during childbirth, leaving behind orphans. Unknown diseases that wipe out entire families.

Sometimes life was very hard. Back in the day, you had to go miles and miles within the lands to get food. Back then, there was freedom. We all depended on the land, the resources. But you can't take away the struggles we faced to survive, because there are times, seasons, years, where game was abandoned, there was starvation, cold months, bad climate, people froze! These are only a few of the hardships we faced.

Philip Peastitude, Naskapi

One would have to be crazy to want to return to the past, to live as our ancestors.

And one would have to be ignorant to not grasp the magnitude of their achievement. We are the heirs of their suffering, their survival.

This forest, it was inhabited, for a time period exceeding the 400 years of Western history, for a time period which can be counted by millennia. Through the forest, from one mountain to another, from a stream to a river. Their struggle, their lives, their difficulties have served as our guide. It is because they walked, inhabited the wild forests, that we can go there today to refocus. It is because they have portaged, rowed, killed animals, that we are still living in these territories. And when, during the winter holidays, we happen to take the train, to watch the snowing horizons go by, to live a few days in the distant silence; when we happen to stay in a log cabin during a storm, we should never, under any circumstances,

forget the ancestors from whom we come, those who have helped us to love our territory.

#### HUNTER-GATHERER

We do not own the animals. Our respect for them has always been part of our myths, stories and customs. It was an honor for our ancestors to be named after animals with similar traits to their own. Our hunting practices also share this respect. There is a time and a way: with thanks and offerings to the life that is offered to serve our own; never during the breeding season, as is the case today in sport hunting. The animal is conscious of its role in the universe and the need we have for it, it therefore comes voluntarily to the hunter.

For caribou hunting, everything was done as a family: the hunter, the members of his family for butchering, those who brought the caribou into the tent to prepare the meat: cut, dry, grind. The meat was never to touch the ground. The antlers hung on trees waiting to be claimed by future generations of caribou. The more we respected the animal and the territory, the more we were respected. The respectful hunter was considered rich. The relationship with the territory called for great conscientiousness, humbleness and respectfulness. The more respect the hunter has for his tools; the more likely it is that the animal will present itself to him. The more beautiful his clothes, the more the animal recognizes, respects and offers itself to him. The hunter, therefore chosen by the animal, becomes respectable, and then the spirits come visit him, conveys things to him, gives him information.

Anne-Marie St-Onge, Innu

Hunting and fishing remain to this day the foundation for the survival of our traditional way of life and represent an essential supply of food for many families. It is also through hunting that several craft practices survive, by supplying the raw materials for their realization. This is why we must conserve resources and protect

breeding. For our communities, being a good hunter especially also implies having knowledge of the animal's behavior and the sense to take it into account for the species' survival.

Within culture, everything is important. What is important for me is what we eat. Culture is linked to what the ancestors consumed. To eat fish, you go fishing, for hare you go to the snares. If you want to eat caribou, you must go hunting. At the same time, you participate in traditional activities as you leave for hunting. While eating, you participate in your traditional activities. It is not by getting a burger at McDonald's that you are going to participate in traditional activities.

Essimeu "Titus" McKenzie, Innu

The good hunter is also one who shares his catch with the community. Although the arrival of freezers has changed our practices by allowing long term conservation of the meat, sharing is still practiced today but rather among the clan or with family rather than with the whole village as in the past. Thus, the Elders who no longer have direct access to hunting are never forgotten.

For us nothing is lost, all parts of the animal are destined for something, serve a purpose, a practice. All caribou or moose meat is good, everything can be eaten; like wolves, we leave nothing behind.

But nowadays, some parts are thrown away because city life changes our practices. Animal carcasses often left behind by hunters are wasted and this troubles us. The act of exhibiting the moose head on the hood of ones car as a trophy is also troubling, since in our opinion this shows a lack of respect for the spirit of the animal, to the gift it has given with its life.

Hunting is much more than technique; it is a lifestyle that has dominated human evolution for thousands of years. With regards to the scale of evolution, agriculture as a way of life represents only 1% of history. What can be said about industrial society which, even if it affects the entire planet, represents only a tiny percentage. During 99% of its existence, the Homo sapiens were hunter-gatherers, the common factor in human evolution is therefore pre-agricultural and nomadic. While agriculture promotes responsibility, obedience, parentage, social and political stratification and economic diversity, hunting promotes independence, autonomy, exploration and more horizontal-type relationships rather than vertical-type and hierarchical.

In concrete terms, our brain and nervous system, our interests and emotions, are products of this lifestyle. Hunting is an integrated system of morphological, physiological, genetic and intellectual aspects of the human species. Hunting involves training and socialization of children based on an active interpretation system. It requires spatial knowledge of ones territory, to know where, what and when to hunt. This sophisticated ecological knowledge, as well as an anticipation of the animal's behavior and climatic conditions, requires a working knowledge of dietetics, biology, pharmacopoeia, construction and use of transportation methods (logistics); but especially a heliocentric and stellar orientation ability not only to track down prey, but also to return to base camp!

Of course, hunting also affects personality, intelligence and one's view of the world.

Jacques Kurtness, Innu

### **SPIRITUALITY**

Between birth and death, life is but an accessory. What matters to us is the survival of the spirit which depends on family members who must look after the spirit of the dead, through the bonds created by the drum.

The use of this instrument requires special respect, demands a seriousness and thereby, bears in its symbolism purity and the centrality of relationships that bind us to other beings, to the world and to spirits. We are reclaiming this organ which is the drum to stay alive; we strike its membrane so that the meanings of our dreams finally become understandable again through the chaos of this era.

The drum as a direct link with the spirit world

The drum is sacred. It is through dreams that the spirits will come see you, to tell you to chant, and then build your drum. One must dream three times about the drum to deserve it. The Elder must play on your drum once you have built it to consecrate it. Then you can make others dance, do incantations to know where are the caribou and the other humans. The drum can give answers to your questions by contacting the spirits: the Elders say that you can watch the drum as we watch TV nowadays, images appear.

Anne-Marie St-Onge, Innu

Many are fighting for the repatriation of our ancestors' bones preserved in museums or universities. We want to bring them back near us, within our communities; an urgent necessity since abandoning them is unthinkable to us.

## FOUNDING STORIES, LEGENDS AND MYTHS

Despite all the differences among nations, animals bring us together through their symbolic nature; they are a common language of the territory. From generation to generation we share the story of the bear, the wolf, the porcupine, the raven and the whale in several nations and according to different features, but always based on the knowledge and powers of the beast.

Traditionally, many claimed that we all had an animal ancestor and that it determined the clan to which we belonged, lending us in passing its abilities, its strength, and this very special bond with the territory. In addition, some legends claimed that our survival depended on the spirit of the hunted animals.

In some way, the animals are our point of origin. They are the ones who, by their sacrifices and teachings, have shaped us.

A legends is timeless. It is part of a past era set in a vaporous space where dreams and poems are woven. A legend recalls the time when animals were similar to humans. It considers the whimsical appearance and disappearance of spirits, done without any apparent reason, a natural occurrence. It is not rational. It is colorful and spirited.

A legend is alive.

A legend teaches us what we must know. It tells us about our creators, supernatural heroes, friends, enemies and situates us on earth and in heaven. A legend is a spirit's friend, an ally to wisdom, an assistant to memory. It is tragic, humoristic, frightening or reassuring. It is philosophical, dishonest, provocative, shameless spiritual or frivolous. It has all of the world's qualities and flaws.

A legend is essential.

We can not live without the euphoria, surprise, sadness and knowledge we are provided by these stories. They turn the world into tales.

One day, there was a wolf prowling around the camp, the woman asked the man, you have to do something. The man went out and left for a day or two. When he returned, the woman asked the man, "What did you do?" The man replied, "I went to bring it to the other side of the ocean." The woman found this hard to believe, but the wolf never returned.

Claude Kistabish Anishabe (Algonquin)

Plentiful like the trees of the forest, myths of the world's creation are abundant and come in several versions. While different, they are similar. Every nation, every community, every family has its version.

Legends have diverse subjects: creation of planets and the earth, conflicts and wars, love, lust, gluttony, sloth, deception, pilferage, ghosts, monstrous creatures, wicked sorcerers or dedicated healers, altruistic or harmful animals, nourishing and medicinal plants.

Legends remind us of who we are and from which culture we come from. Besides giving life lessons, they educate on prohibitions by establishing what was acceptable or not in a given society.

Legends had an educative goal, they were not only fun for entertainment or putting children to sleep. They were a method of education, another type of schooling. They were a method of conveying values and knowledge; very valuable lessons. There was this lesson in morality as a teaching value.

Nicole O'Bomsawin, Abenaki

### **EDUCATION - TRANSMISSION**

There was a time when the transmission of knowledge was natural. The principle of survival stronger than everything. To learn how to live in the woods and in tents, one had to learn how to tan caribou skin, weave snowshoes, fish with a harpoon, and bake bread in ashes. We educated children through example. They learned through observation. Given that all of this was necessary.

Recognition of the role of Wise man or Elder is not a matter of age. Our Wise men are conveyers of stories, narratives, traditions, they are guardians of our culture.

Children also have an important place in our societies whose cohesion is ensured through respect rather than through authority. It is with their parents that children learned, by living in their shoes and discovering for themselves why they had to obey. A parent's role is to guide, without imposing, so as not to interfere with the spirits which also guide the child.

The Circle of Life

Children are very important within the territory. They are the core. Before birth, they are in the round belly, they are born in a round tent, they warm up to a circular fire, to the chant of a circular drum. They eat round bread, bannock. Year after year, their travels within the land have them circling to return to the earth at the end of their lives. Day by day, throughout the seasons, children realize that they are part of nature. Grandparents tell children "come hunting with us, you can observe and later, when your turn comes, you will be ready, you will be able to hunt. One day, you will be able to perform our actions." They must learn about the animal, not be afraid of it and respect it.

Anne-Marie St-Onge, Innu

From the creation of reserves, from the sudden change in lifestyle, such knowledge has become an accessory. And since school was the school of life, transmission no longer had any support, neither in practice nor in the leading function of things to be built.

We have to experiment culture in order to learn it.

Quentin Condo, Mi'gmaq (Micmac)

The education practiced by Europeans upon their arrival was much stricter than traditional education and the shock of residential schools was even greater for our children.

The games children partake in during the early stages of life while sitting in the sand are actually the game of playing at life. With their small wooden caribous, at each stage of the game they must learn something: the male caribou, the female, the herd, to follow the caribou into its territory, to contact the animals' spirits using various tools to talk to them, the drum, amulets, monoculars (an empty stick through which only you can see, in the distance), burned shoulder blades, the caribou fetus that you must cook and offer to Elders, the shaking tent, the white caribou hide, all things that are offered to you by nature. To rest or heal, after a long journey or a significant effort such as a long portage, the sweat tent offers you some relief because it is purifying. We also take part in this practice before a portage to reduce body weight. It seeks the energies of the great fathers.

Anne-Marie St-Onge, Innu

## BACK TO THE SOURCE

Pow wows allow us to gather together and share.

For everything that they encompass has somewhat of a sacred, protective and personal quality. It is not only the folklorization of culture. There is nothing to sell, nothing to photograph. Everything is sharing, demonstrating. Each object in itself represents a sign, a symbolic power.

Pow Wows are a framework of exchange allowing some kind of colorful renaissance of our identity.

A certain agitation is produced, an amalgam of knowledge, signs and symbols that are conveyed by the different nations. Pow Wows, as well as this knowledge-sharing dimension, are intrinsically linked. To reconnect with practices which have been left behind for so long, expanding the boundaries of knowledge necessarily becomes a matter of cultural survival. These events therefore intend for knowledge to be somewhat nomadic, as it allows for many people to find and take upon themselves this lost connection to a common identity. The nations mingle, share amongst themselves and thus bring together in their own way specific traditions, a rich and pure wisdom.

Regalias reflect this passion, this pride and a desire to belong. Through their preparation and their ritualistic wearing, our young people rediscover, identify and spiritualize themselves; giving meaning to their existence and their difference, a meaning needing no words, which emerges through actions, through praxis. This return to traditional practices, such as dances and drum chanting are once again closely linked to the communion of beings and spirits, to the respect for life as the cornerstone of any reflection on the world and to the importance we must attribute to it.

When women traditional dancers go up and dance, when their song is called, you'll see many men stand up to respect their grandmothers, their aunties, their moms, their wives, and their daughters. Because these are the women that are telling stories about life, about life-giving.

Derek Barnaby, Mi'gmaq (Micmac)

## BEING TOGETHER

Before the creation of the bands, there were family clans. To live together in clans, there needed to be a leader, clan mothers, a hierarchical system, because to survive, we had to be together. Community spirit was not an incidental value; it was a focus of our concerns. Like mutual aid, between young and old. Like sharing, between rich and poor. Like hard work, during times of famine. If the ancestors could share with us their life story, they would without a doubt tell us that they didn't have a choice, that this was how it was. Each role, established for survival. Man was the provider, the hunter, the protector. He drew from everyday labors, daily pride and contentment.

Following the hunters were the clan mothers. Women of authority. They educated, organized, baked bread and fed their family. With men gone for long periods of time, they ensured the survival of their own, took charge in quarrels, enforced justice. All day long and even during the night, they made sure that all went well. These grandmothers, 100 years old; these mothers, barely pubescent.

When I was young my father was often away, he would leave for perhaps 1 or 2 weeks and even when he was guiding during the summer he would leave for most of the summer. It was my mother who was in charge of education. We lived in Parent in the woods, in a tent. During the winter, we had a small log cabin but I faced winters in tents. At night, we took turns going to sleep at my grandmothers, especially during winter because she had a nice warm feather blanket. When you're a dozen siblings, your turn doesn't come often. My grandmother had her own camp, a small tent with a wood stove. I don't know why, she has remained with her two youngest sons. The others had moved to other hunting grounds. My grandmother worked every day, she worked hard. She cut her own wood. She did her own little hunting. During the summer, every family went to their own territory for small game hunting, fishing, blueberries, wild fruits. This is how we nourished ourselves. It was a good time. It was our life.

Mariette Niquay, Atikamek Nehirowisi

In the past, we were autonomous beings. Women gave birth in tents. Families were self-sufficient. Meat, abundant at times. Autonomy was based on knowledge acquired in past centuries. Free to think, free to act, survival was the sole priority.

Family ties were the core of our nations, our foundation. Family was the tight circle in which our People grew.

The newborns' ceremony has always been practiced by the Atikamekw. We show the child the four directions of the world, to thank the light that it has been given when conceived. During the ceremony, the child is held by each family member and each one speaks to it so as to share the responsibility of the child. It thus becomes a child of the community.

Roger Eshaquan, Atikamek Nehirowisi

This was before reservations, before assimilation, before residential schools. At one point, there was disengagement.

## LANGUAGE

It could name anything. The names of mountains and rivers. Soft and hard woods. Edible wild berries and those that harm. Wet and powdery snow. The north wind, violent, incessant; the calm sea breeze in the early morning, at twilight. The, Innu, Atikamekw, Wendat, Maliseet, Mi'gmak, and Naskapi languages could name every single thing on earth, every human emotion.

The Innu language is mainly in nature, not in school, there are no school concepts within the language. The elements of nature, they are points of reference.

Jean-Pier Donat, Innu

These are ancient languages that remind us of a distant past, where poetry and rhythm are as much inspiration as nature itself.

Poetry is necessary and vital since a people's literature begins with the orality of its poetry. It is a life force that grabs you by the gut, which tugs at the back of your throat; it is a wild territory of words just waiting to be discovered and scattered by the winds. So here we are. Talk of beauty. Talk of truth. Talk of the world. Take part in our unique perspective of this beautiful and great narrative, in the wealth of these outlooks.

With words, we find and share the beauty that surrounds us, the stories and the different perspectives on the world introduced by each language; of all these characteristics that make us rise and define us in terms of identity. For us, poetry, the language of observation, makes perfect sense, it comes naturally. It is what allows for the understanding of reality in the most fluid manner possible, the most organic.

Aboriginal languages tell our story, the places where our ancestors have travelled, however they are unable to name all the modernity, the sudden and swift changes.

Any nation's identity, anywhere on the globe, is something that evolves. It's like languages. A language that does not include foreign words, that does not enrich itself, will become sclerotic. It is also the same for identities.

Jocelyn Paul, Huron-Wendat

Aboriginal languages are not often written since they are read by few people. They were practical languages, created to name the function of things. They were not languages designed for writing, but rather for chanting and speeches. Both of these arts are still the most mastered today. In new Aboriginal literature, we use maternal languages to recreate the time of our ancestors, renew our perspective on their

gestures, and poetize the vastness of nature. Each word conjures a powerful and real imagery.

#### IT'S ABOUT TIME

We do not believe that we possess time; we do not divide it into units called seconds, minutes and hours. Longer cycles govern our lives, passages from days to nights, the seasons, cycles of life and death. In the past, we did not have watches and took the necessary time for each activity. Traveling with young children took longer; we would set up camp wherever we stopped. This is what many call Indian Time.

Back then, our people didn't have to think about time related work, about productivity of time regarding money. They decided to fish one day, and then to work on their objects, they focused all their time on that. They could pass months and months on a single object. They were proud of it afterwards.

Quentin Condo, Mi'gmak (Micmac)

This notion of time seen as a continuous movement, long and slow, sometimes creates a difficult convergence between our respective cultures. While modern life seeks to control through addition and subtraction, we are time, we drift with it. All of our myths express a vision of a world to be shared where everything is connected and basks in universal time where the past, present and future are intertwined, since everything that happens, even the smallest elements of this world has an impact on the others: from the explosion of a nuclear reactor in Japan, so far, to the local mining operations, so near, the impacts will affect several generations, seven according to our philosophies.

Until the age of seven, I lived in the woods. We rarely stayed in a house; we lived in a tent or a log cabin. So that's where I grew up, in a tent, with fir branches. We nourished ourselves from nature. We took our time. It was not: "We're leaving; we'll be there at such an hour." It was not like that. It was not time dictated by the clock but rather time for blueberries, time of fish, time of beaver. That's how it worked. They did not have a watch. When you left someplace, whether it took one, two or three weeks; it was the way of life.

Édouard David Kistabish, James Cananasso, Anishinabeg (Algonquins)

### THE PATH

The past tells us a story. The brutal transformations of the First Peoples, from nomadic to sedentary, from self-sufficient to dependent, from prideful to shameful. Since this story is written in time, it can not be erased. It exists to remind us that the settlement mentality can destroy identities, nations, humans.

A word must be said regarding the inability of this colonial mindset to foster a genuine convergence with the mindset of Others.

This story built from bits of memory, shows us how resilient humans are. Even through loss and suffering, it is able to survive, rise up, restructure and be reborn. It is able to find its way.

To represent all of reality's beauty and diversity, we stand at the cultures' junction; our current identity is situated here, within the entanglement of what is possible, within this wealth of miscegenation inherent in a vibrant culture.

Hence, the Aboriginal Being [and art] is developing; it is interacting, open to the world and to exchanges, while remaining firmly rooted to its traditions. Its future may reside in the improvement of this dualism.

As the world changes, we need to change. We can't live in the past. We use the past to strengthen the present, as we get ready for the future.

Gilbert Whiteduck, Anishabe (Algonquin)