

Senimikwaldamw8gan

Mémoire de pierre

Mélanie O'Bomsawin

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THE TELLTALE STONES OF MEMORY

What if I talked to a stone

and told it something I remember from my grandfather?

A story that he had once told me.

Would the stone become

its caretaker?

Stones witness everything. It's no coincidence that they are said to be bearers of memories and wisdom, just as our ancestors. In Anishinaabemowin, for example, the word *mushum* means both "grandfather" and "stone."

What if I also

took the time to listen to stones?

Would they tell me family stories from ages ago,

stories of those who were here long before me

and whose memories flow through my mind?

Mélanie wanted to pay a fitting tribute to her grandfathers—one W8banaki, the other Québécois—and have them come together in an exhibition. *Senimikwaldamw8gan* assembles twenty-seven stones, a reference to the infinitely repeating lunar cycle that marks the passing of time. Mélanie chose them with great care: thirteen stones come from Odanak, the ancestral land of her paternal grandfather, and thirteen others from Lake Temiskaming, where her maternal grandfather spent a large part of his life. The twenty-seventh stone comes from LaSalle, where Mélanie lives with her family and is raising her children. It represents Mélanie, like a bridge between the two cultures and two lands that forged the identities of her grandfathers. She wanted to unite them, put them in conversation with one another.

It is highly likely that Mélanie's grandfathers met at some point, either at a wedding or family celebration. Perhaps they even swapped stories, told jokes, ate at the same table. Reunited here, in the space created by Mélanie, they become a portal for surveying the precipice of memory and exploring what is lodged deep in our minds. These oral stories leave behind a legacy: memories of one grandfather's laughter or the other's expressions; teachings we can absorb.

What if memory was made of many layers of the same story?

Stories told and retold:

Tentacles of my family's oral history

In order to preserve the memory of her grandfathers and to keep it alive, Mélanie first turned to sound. She sat down with her two grandfathers, took out her recorder, listened to them, probably drank tea. It was a moment that they experienced together. That they shared. Inevitably, this moment would colour Mélanie's memory of their stories, just as would her way of recounting them later.

In an accumulation of Betamax tapes, Mini DVs, and WAV files, Mélanie examines what gets eroded and lost with the digitization of memory. The ease with which we can now archive speech changes our relationship to memory. These collected and recorded fragments of tales, stories, and anecdotes certainly allow her to always remember her grandfathers' laughter, the timbre of their voices, and the cadence of their accents, but there are also things that get transmitted in other ways, through the relationship one has with others or through a connection with the land. The stones gathered for this exhibition bear within them the family memory of nomadism, roads taken, and life paths. They also attest to a love for the land that her grandfathers passed down to her. They represent another way of having access to what they are.

With *Senimikwaldamw8gan*, Mélanie offers an intimate reflection on filiation and the values that she inherited. These values are imbued with a personal connection with the land and are shared by her two lineages. They are what she is passing down to her own children. Like the moon watching over stones, creating fertile moments for telling stories.

— Émilie Monnet —

Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei