

Official Selection

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Toronto International Film Festival 2019

A FILM BY MYRIAM VERREAUULT
FREELY BASED ON THE NOVEL BY NAOMI FONTAINE

QUÉBEC CITY
FILM
FESTIVAL



YAMIE
GRÉGOIRE

SHARON
FONTAINE-ISHPATAO

ÉTIENNE
GALLOY

FILMOPTION INTERNATIONAL PRESENTS A MAX FILMS MÉDIA PRODUCTION

KUESSIPAN

WRITTEN BY MYRIAM VERREAUULT AND NAOMI FONTAINE PRODUCED BY FÉLIZE FRAPPIER

SHARON FONTAINE-ISHPATAO YAMIE GRÉGOIRE ÉTIENNE GALLOY CÉDRICK AMBROISE CAROLINE YACHON MIKE INNU PAPI MCKENZIE DOUGLAS GRÉGOIRE ANNISS DESTERRÉS ROSELYN FONTAINE ARIEL FONTAINE-ST-ONGE KATINEN GRÉGOIRE-FONTAINE JOE FONTAINE
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY NICOLAS CANNICCIONI PRODUCTION DESIGNER JOELLE PÉLOUQUIN COSTUME DESIGNER MARJOLAYNE DESROSIERS SCRIPT CONSULTANT VIRGINIE BARRET MENTOR TO THE ACTRESS AND THE DIRECTOR BRIGITTE POUPART 1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTORS JEANNE LEBLANC MICHEL MARRÉC PRODUCTION MANAGERS ZIAD TOUMA JULIE GROLEAU
HEAD RELATIONS DIRECTOR KIM FONTAINE SOUND FREDÉRIC CLOUTIER STEPHEN DE OLIVEIRA SOUND DESIGNERS SAMUEL GAGNON-THIBODEAU SYLVAIN BELLEMARE SOUND MIXER BERNARD GARIÉPY STROBL MUSIC BY LOUIS-JEAN CORMIER EDITORS AMÉLIE LABRÈCHE MYRIAM VERREAUULT SOPHIE LEBLANC
ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS SYLVIE LACOSTE RÉGINALD VOLLANT PRODUCER FÉLIZE FRAPPIER SCREENPLAY MYRIAM VERREAUULT NAOMI FONTAINE FREELY BASED ON THE NOVEL KUESSIPAN BY NAOMI FONTAINE AND PUBLISHED BY ÉDITIONS MÉMOIRE D'ENCRICRÉ DIRECTOR MYRIAM VERREAUULT

PRODUCED WITH THE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE OF



WITH THE COLLABORATION OF



DISCOVERY

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SYNOPSIS

Two girls grow up as best friends in an Innu community. While Mikuan has a loving family, Shaniss is picking up the pieces of her shattered childhood. As children, they promised each other to stick together no matter what. But as they're about to turn 17, their friendship is shaken when Mikuan falls for a white boy, and starts dreaming of leaving the reserve that's now too small for her dreams.

MYRIAM VERREAUULT

Writer & Director

Myriam Verreault grew up in Loretteville, a Quebec City suburb. After completing her studies in journalism, history and cinema, she worked as a props person, director and editor in the television and film industry. In 2009, she made a name for herself by co-directing, scripting, producing, and editing ***West of Pluto***, her critically-acclaimed debut feature film, which went on to be screened at some 50 festivals around the world. In 2011, she directed the web documentary ***My Tribe Is My Life – Shana, The Emo Kid*** for the National Film Board of Canada, where she was faced with the realities of a young resident of Mani-Utenam. In 2014, she edited Mélanie Carrier and Olivier Higgins' ***Québécoisie***, a Jutra-nominated documentary that explores the relationship between Quebecers and Indigenous people. Myriam started her research and writing for ***Kuessipan*** in 2012 in collaboration with the writer of the book by the same name, Naomi Fontaine, and spent five hardworking years on it, during which she made multiple immersion trips to the Innu community before beginning to shoot.

Myriam currently directs *5e rang*, an ICI Radio-Canada television series.





INTERVIEW with

MYRIAM VERREAU (Writer/Director) &

NAOMI FONTAINE (Co-writer and author of the book *Kuessipan*)

***Kuessipan* means: your turn, over to you. Beyond the meaning it has in the book, what are its implications?**

Myriam Verreault: The title echoes not just history, but also the creative process. For the film to exist, something needed to be transferred, handed over — a kind of passing of the torch. Naomi agreed to give me her book, and with it, she also transmitted a certain spirit and knowledge.

Naomi Fontaine: The book isn't strictly speaking a "story." It's a collection of voices. When I wrote *Kuessipan*, my intention was very clear: show the faces, places and lived experience of my community. I wanted to step away from the more stereotypical media representation of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam,*1 which is to say, images of indolence and the loss of identity. *Kuessipan* means first and foremost "your turn," "their turn." Those I speak of, it's their turn to exist outside of the prejudices.

1) *The Innu community is geographically divided: Uashat, cut off by Sept-Îles, lies to the south-west of the city on the bay; and Mani-Utenam, 20 km to the east, is perched on a cliff overlooking the St. Lawrence.*

MV: This transfer then took place with the cast, practically all of whom were Innu from the community, acting in a professional context for the very first time. Embodying characters who were very close to them, they prove, in turn, that they too could be part of this world.

It's difficult to imagine the film being made anywhere other than in the Côte-Nord region.

MV: The first time I visited Uashat, I fell in love with the people and I immediately knew that not only did they need to be shown but also and above all, that they had to be given their just due. I had never seen them on film or on TV. They simply didn't figure in the image we have of Quebecers. I was convinced others could fall in love with them just as I had. But for this to happen, everything would need to be done in situ.

NF: There's also the significance of the place itself. You have this vast territory, the river which is as wide as a sea, the seasons... then there's the reserve, a space that's contained, bounded. Still, this spatial confinement brings about a closeness between people, with all of the beautiful things that implies: solidarity, mutual aid, interconnection.

MV: The word "reserve" has a negative connotation. But when you get down to it, what is a reserve, really? It's the people. And so I wanted to show this place through the lives of those who live here.

NF: Hence the distinction that must be made between reserve and community. The reserve is the place. The community is the people. There's a physical barrier, a demarcated boundary between the reserve and the city of Sept-Îles that cuts Uashat off from Mani-Utenam, which is 15 minutes away by car. But the community transcends that.

Naomi, who were you addressing when you wrote *Kuessipan*?

NF: Quebecers. I had moved to Quebec City when I was seven and they had this distorted idea of my people. I wanted to say, "Let me show you my grandmother's face." Afterwards, I realized that the Innu recognized themselves in my book and that recognizing oneself in literature was good, important and a pleasure.

Myriam, what was your way into the book?

MV: Naomi's writing style is very vivid — descriptive without being cumbersome. I could really see it. One sentence in particular affected me strongly: *J'aimerais que vous la connaissiez, la fille au ventre rond*. I'd like you to meet her, the girl with the rounded belly. I knew her, I understood her and I felt all of the author's love for her. I was identifying with someone who was not me and I was able to imagine living on the reserve, wanting to leave but also



wanting to stay. There's a great deal of misunderstanding about the Innu, like the fact that Innu girls become mothers at a young age. And there's something so simple in how Naomi describes it all, in the "why not" that blasts our prejudices into smithereens.

The book is remarkable for its evocative power, but it's not a narrative in the usual sense of the term. How did you make the transition to film?

MV: Well, first there was this two-month research trip back in the summer of... 2012!

NF: We made it a summer trip. We spent a lot of time with people on the beach, around a campfire. We got out a lot...

MV: It was a shock in a good way — it did away with this image I'd had of Indigenous people where they are objects of pity. I partied with them. I had these great big ambitions of writing the first version that summer, but I didn't write a single line! [laughs ruefully] I felt like I was playing hooky. There was just too much to learn, too much to assimilate. But basically, the writing process was already in motion, just from spending time with them.

How did the co-writing process take shape?

MV: After we had worked together on a story outline and hashed out what we wanted to say, I would sit down and write every day. Naomi, in turn, became the keeper of Innu culture



and custodian of the project's spirit. It was a long process, easy to lose your bearings. She kept bringing me back to what it was we wanted to accomplish, to what the film needed to be. And somehow through these long phone conversations we had, where we would just shoot the breeze, talking about life, she infused my writing with new ideas and images.

How did the story emerge?

MV: We wanted to show Innu life through the eyes of a young girl (Mikuan) but also tell a story that could have happened anywhere. Saying "here is *one* Innu girl" isn't the same as saying "here are *the* Innu," which is impossible anyway and not that interesting dramatically. Based on the impressions we'd received while there and the book's powerful imagery, we dreamt up these two friends, Mikuan and Shaniss. Both have their own strengths which are at once in conflict and mutually nourishing: one wants to leave, the other wants to stay. This was already a transgression, since these characters are not in the book per se. In concrete terms, the more we worked on the script, the more we moved away from the book, though never betraying its spirit.

NF: When we speak of Indigenous peoples, we tend to put everyone in one basket. We needed to be able to see the multitude of possibles. This is why it was important to develop other characters like Mikuan's brother Metshu, their parents, her grandma and Shaniss's boyfriend.

The script went through numerous iterations and many rejections. What was gained during the rewrites? What was lost?

MV: One thing that was lost was my wish to make something more impressionistic, more like a series of vignettes. There was a shift toward something that was more narrative in the North American sense. Because of the rejections, I ended up developing each character further, giving them more depth. I was also able to shed any complexes I had about traditional narratives and I lost my fear of making something more conventional. The people and the settings were so remote, so unknown, that they became the source of the new dimension.

Was the idea of a voice-over there from the start?

MV: Mikuan's voice-over, which had been part of the earlier versions, was then removed so that we could think more in storytelling terms, imagining concrete actions. But then during production I brought it back, which in turn led me back to the book. So, we had moved away from the book while writing the screenplay, only to come back to it at the end with a clearer idea of what we needed to take from it. It all happened organically because we had respected the spirit of the book.

The voice-over is not unlike a film score in that it helps us understand Mikuan and the Innu emotionally and intuitively.

NF: Myriam's images add new layers of meaning to the passages drawn from the book. I had my own images when I wrote, and now they were giving rise to new and complementary images. The voice-over recalls the book admirably.

MV: The voice-over adds poetry, but at the same time it is rooted in reality, through the evocative power of Naomi's words. The voice-over is also relevant to the storyline since Mikuan is a budding writer whose worldview is forged through words.

Beyond the tale of a close friendship put to the test, the film communicates the notion of freedom in many ways: in the relationship to the land, in the rapport with others and in future aspirations.

MV: I remember a phone interview I gave during my scriptwriting trip. From her Montréal office, the journalist asked me what had most struck me about the Innu. At that very moment, I was watching a 10-year-old girl driving an ATV on the beach, no helmet. I answered: freedom. During my stay, I got this sense of a type of freedom that expressed itself like a giant "fuck you" to rules, laws, dividing lines...



NF: There is no word for “freedom” in the Innu language. You must know confinement to get an idea of what freedom means. One way of expressing this idea in my language would be “the end of confinement.” The opposite of the reserve, in effect.

MV: I tried to reproduce moments that transcended the confinement of the reserve. The opening scene captures this. We see Mikuan and Shaniss as children, catching small fish — capelin — on the beach at night.

So Mikuan’s quest for freedom isn’t a rejection of her community, but rather of this “confinement”?

MV: Mikuan is a young Innu woman in 2019, proud of her roots, but who also has questions that go beyond her cultural identity. She wonders whether she can have an impact on things, make a difference, not just in her own life, but also on a grander scale. Her questions are hard-hitting and would be relevant anywhere. Shaniss has similar questions, but her choices are different. She starts a family at a very young age. She loves the place. She doesn’t want to leave. Their discussions reflect their respective views.

Kids are everywhere: in the streets, on the reserve, in every aspect of life. And the drama in their world is what would normally be expected when you grow up. There’s one scene where Shaniss says: “Sometimes I feel we’re already old.”



NF: Kids are at the heart of everything. They have complete freedom, playing outside with few restrictions. The flipside to this freedom is that they grow up faster. They are faced with death and drama much more directly.

Social problems are there in the background, but there's no wallowing in them. They don't stifle life in all its radiance and vigour. How did you reconcile the two?

MV: The art direction doesn't lie or embellish anything. The environment is in keeping with reality; the poverty is visible. The luminous tone comes from the filming, how we chose to frame things. We trained our lens on the people, not on the details of the setting or the harshness that underlies certain scenes. Yes, the characters go through periods of indolence, but they're also the ones who emanate light.

During production, the watchword was to follow the actors and not the other way around. To let them roam free, not confine them with a rigid script or markers on the ground. We wanted their acting to feel natural, unrestrained. Cinematographer Nicolas Cannicconi and lighting director Denis Lamothe worked very hard at times to light the scene so that we could shoot at nearly 360 degrees.

The performances are overwhelmingly real.

NF: If I knew one thing for sure, it was that Myriam was going to find some incredible actors in the community. The Innu are very in touch with who they are, with their feelings. Acting

comes naturally. We're playful by nature!

MV: Not one of the cast had professional experience. So my approach, by necessity, was to work with who and what they were in real life. And to find people whose lives and personalities aligned as closely as possible with the characters. Sharon Fontaine-Ishpatao was chosen to play Mikuan because she *is* Mikuan. The audition amounted to a two-hour conversation where we discussed her life. I couldn't believe it: I felt like I was talking to the character I'd invented. Sharon was very shy at first. She's not an extrovert. The casting director had to really pursue her to get her to come and test. Same with Yamie Grégoire, who plays Shaniss. There were flashes of brilliance in her tests, but there were also lots of misses, a lot of misfires. She had no experience. For a regular film, I would have looked elsewhere. But she was Shaniss at heart and that's the truth that interested me and that I wanted to capture.

Once you'd found your actors, there was still a lot of work to be done to achieve this level of performance. How did you proceed?

MV: Two candidates were selected for each role. Workshops were then organized with the help of Brigitte Poupart, who came to Uashat before the shoot commenced and stayed for a good part of the production. She came up with all sorts of tips to help them relax and open up. Then she led the acting workshops, which gave me a chance to watch the actors at a bit of a distance. We rehearsed a lot. We let them interpret the lines in their own way.

During production, we used two cameras to capture the greatest possible number of reactions and I also did some very long takes with no cuts to allow situations to unfold naturally.

Supressed racism is evoked at certain points, like in the bar at the start of the film or in the quarrel between Shaniss and Mikuan, when the latter says she wants to go and study in Quebec City with her boyfriend Francis, who's white. How do you view this topic?

MV: Personally, I don't see it as racism toward whites but rather a fear of the "other." There is genuine collective anxiety about survival as a people. The Innu are destined to resist. They number less than 20,000, not eight million. Francophone Quebecers should be able to understand this minority-based reality and the attendant issues of cultural loss. Where do you draw the line between safeguarding cultural wealth and defensive identity politics? The film raises this question by focusing on a small community. But it's a universal, timeless, extremely complex subject that is today more relevant than ever. What I like



about this quarrel between Mikuan and Shaniss is that neither of them is in the wrong.

NF: When Myriam first arrived in the community, she was immediately accepted because of her attitude. She had an attitude of respect and openness; but she was also easygoing, approachable, super chill.

MV: What really struck me is that whites and Innu are literally next-door neighbours in Sept-Îles. You cross the street and suddenly you're in the reserve or you've just left it. People live side-by-side without speaking. The love story of Mikuan and Francis says much about this silent proximity and its complexities.

Mikuan and Francis share certain things: their fears, their love of writing and music. Their worlds aren't really so distant from one another, yet at the same time, they live worlds apart. They can't ignore cultural differences and especially, the weight of history. In her boyfriend's defense, Mikuan reminds Shaniss that he "did not steal anyone's land." Yet despite himself, Francis bears the burden of collective guilt.

How did you use music and why did you go with Louis-Jean Cormier?

MV: I wanted the original score to be melodic and not culturally loaded. Innu music is very present in the film, as is the music Mikuan listens to, which is the pop music of today. But the score was really to mirror Mikuan's interiority with insight and a real emotional charge.

Producer Félize Frappier had already met Louis-Jean. Since he's from Sept-Îles, she thought of him for composing the score. When she first told me of this, I was dubious. I had a lot of respect for him as an artist but I was afraid it would seem like just a publicity stunt, or else that his participation might eclipse the actors. These fears proved unjustified.

The screenplay really moved him and he gave himself over fully to the project. Being from Sept-Îles, his interest was also prompted by his familiarity with the realities of life on the reserve (which he'd lived near as a child) and richness of Indigenous/non-native relations.

I asked him to come up with unusual sounds and use unconventional instruments. I'd always liked retro electronica and Louis-Jean embraced a whole new style with startling ease. His great strength as a composer is being able to subtly weave the main melody into the viewing experience as opposed to imposing it thunderingly at the start of the film. This was his first time composing for a fiction film, but I have the feeling it's not his last...

The uproar around *SLĀV* and *Kanata* raised questions that would be hard to leave out of this interview. But I think that the film's nature, its manner, is its own answer.

NF: For *Kanata*, Lepage — whose work I admire greatly — deprived himself of something, and that was an *encounter*. What he came under fire for was refusing to cast any Indigenous actors whatsoever.

MV: You need to discern between criticism and censorship. Those who purported to speak for the “other” did not make this important distinction. Instead of listening to where the criticism came from, some preferred just to cry censorship.

NF: Nobody asked Myriam to come to our community and make a film. Nobody stopped her, either. The decision was hers alone. She wanted to portray our lives, our dreams, our suffering. She couldn't just do this any old way: she had to do it with respect, *with us*, putting us on equal footing. At the end of the day, the question of your legitimacy to speak for others is something each artist can only answer for themselves.

MV: Making this film without the Innu would have been like barging into someone's house without knocking or taking off your shoes, going straight to the kitchen and serving yourself from the fridge! I simply wouldn't have been able to do it. But it never even crossed my mind. I wanted to make this film for the express purpose of connecting with the so-called “other.” To attempt it without their consent would have made no sense whatsoever. There's an expression I like: it takes two to tango. And I would add, even more to do the Makusham dance. If the Innu participation in the film had not been so whole-hearted, the project would have sunk. Creating as a duo or in a group requires mutual consent, just like making love.

Of course, when the *Kanata* affair blew up, I began to wonder about my project's legitimacy. But what brought me back to the need to finish the film was the pact I had made with the Innu who had been part of the production. They had put their hearts, their pride and their time into *Kuessipan*. I couldn't betray them. And I came to believe that what had hurt so much with *Kanata* was the exclusion rather than the appropriation. What I hear on the ground is, "Sure, you can talk about us, but not without us." And it seems to me that when you are part of the dominant group, then it's the least you can do.

During production, we made a major effort to hire local people — dozens of actors, extras and crew members — to include and consult with them at every stage. Félize, our producer, reached out to community organizations and the band council. She also teamed up with Innu producer Réginald Vollant in Mani-Utenam. When hiring staff from Montréal, Félize and I established a clear directive: namely, that we were going to stay with the Innu to make a film *with them*, and that genuine sensitivity and respect were essential.

NF: It could be that the film is a form of cultural appropriation. If so, then it's in the best possible way, which is to say, *together*. How you go about it is everything. To be clear: I don't subscribe to the notion of "appropriation" in our current understanding of the term. I believe in exchange and sharing.

MV: In the end, the film speaks for itself. You'll just have to see it.

SHARON FONTAINE-ISHPATAO

Actress

Sharon Fontaine-Ishpatao was born in Uashat and pursued her post-secondary education in visual arts at Cégep de Sept-Îles. As a multidisciplinary artist, her practice blends painting, photography, photomontage, and video. She explores identity, a theme she playfully combines with elements of pop culture, blending absurdity with social engagement.

Produced with the Wapikoni Mobile, her short documentary *De face ou de profil* was presented at many festivals, in addition to earning the Coup de Coeur Télé-Québec award at the 2015 edition of the Montréal First Peoples Festival and Best Documentary at the 2016 Festival du Film Étudiant de Québec. Her visual art work has been exhibited at a number of group shows, including the MAMU symposium. In fall 2018, she began her studies in theatre at Quebec City's Université Laval.

Sharon attracted attention at auditions with her undeniable sensibility, landing her the part of Mikuan, the leading role in *Kuessipan*.

This film gave me hope and confidence. I hope it will change how other people see Indigenous people. Let's be done with the stereotypes. During casting, I really didn't want to audition. I thought it was just another version of the same old story and I was afraid of being made to play this sad sight, a pretty Pocahontas. But Kuessipan is authentic, just like its actors. Everyone who was part of it gave the best of themselves. To anyone who sees it, I hope it moves you as much as it moved me. I am truly honoured to have been part of such a heartfelt project.



YAMIE GRÉGOIRE

Actress

Yamie Grégoire grew up in Uashat and attends Manikanetish High School, where she is part of the improvisation team. Determined, ambitious and a writing enthusiast, she would like to pursue her studies in film. In *Kuessipan*, Yamie plays the role of Shaniss, Mikuan's childhood best friend.

Kuessipan helped me grow. I had some special times with some great people and I loved the experience. Before Kuessipan, I was lost. In making it, I understood who I wanted to be! So it helped me find myself and I think it will really have an impact on others too. We put our hearts and souls into this amazing film that shows us as who we are. Non-native people will get a sense of what life is like in our great community. As for the Innu, it will remind them that their reserves are beautiful.



CAST

SHARON FONTAINE-ISHPATAO
 YAMIE GRÉGOIRE
 ÉTIENNE GALLOY
 CÉDRICK AMBROISE
 CAROLINE VACHON
 MIKE INNU PAPU MCKENZIE
 ANNISS DESTERRES
 ROSELYN FONTAINE
 MIKUPISHAN POIRIER
 ARIEL FONTAINE ST-ONGE
 KATINEN GRÉGOIRE-FONTAINE
 JOE FONTAINE
 DOUGLAS GRÉGOIRE
 BILLY-JACK JOURDAIN
 BRIGITTE POUPART
 MARTIN DESGAGNÉS

Mikuan Vollant (16-21 years old)
Shaniss Jourdain (16-21 years old)
Francis
Metshu Vollant (18 years old)
Louise Vollant
Claude Vollant
Nukum
Uapukun Vollant
Nishkiss (9 months)
Mikuan Vollant (8 years old)
Shaniss Jourdain (8 years old)
Metshu Vollant (8 years old)
Greg
Josh
Mikuan's teacher
Writing workshop leader

CREW

Director
 Screenplay
 Script Consultant
 Producer
 Associate Producers
 Director of Photography
 Production Designer
 Costume Designer
 Mentor to the actors and the director
 1st Assistants
 Sound Recorders
 Editors

 Sound Designers
 Sound Mixer
 Music

MYRIAM VERREAULT
MYRIAM VERREAULT & NAOMI FONTAINE
VIRGINIE BARRET
FÉLIZE FRAPPIER (MAX FILMS MEDIA)
SYLVIE LACOSTE & RÉGINALD VOLLANT
NICOLAS CANNICIONI
JOËLLE PÉLOQUIN
MARJOLAYNE DESROSIERS
BRIGITTE POUPART
JEANNE LEBLANC & MICHEL MARREC
FRÉDÉRIC CLOUTIER & STEPHEN DE OLIVEIRA
AMÉLIE LABRÈCHE, MYRIAM VERREAULT &
SOPHIE LEBLOND
SAMUEL GAGNON-THIBODEAU & SYLVAIN BELLEMARE
BERNARD GARIÉPY-STROBL
LOUIS-JEAN CORMIER

TECHNICAL DETAILS

| | |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Sound Format | 5.1 |
| Ratio | 1:85 |
| Running Time | 117' |
| Original Version | French, Innu |
| Year of Production | 2019 |
| Country | Canada |

CONTACT

International Sales Agent



Be for Films

28 Avenue des Villas – 1060 Brussels – Belgium

23 Rue Fourcroy – 75017 Paris – France

+ 33 6 14 34 37 55

info@beforfilms.com

www.beforfilms.com

International Press Agents

Andréa Grau / TOUCHWOOD PR

andrea@touchwoodpr.com

Cellphone: 416-347-6749

Office: 416-593-0777 x201

Judy Lund / TOUCHWOOD PR

judy@touchwoodpr.com

KUESSIPAN

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