
A DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT

Rivers of Life

Series Treatment

*Narrative in continuous prose · the movement as
felt*

Created by Tan

Feature chapters · Returning series format · Rights of Nature

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For commissioners · impact funders · co-producers · nations

Rivers of Life

Every river is the same confession: that many can become one, and lose nothing of themselves in the joining. Civilization was born on a bank — the first cities, the first laws, the first songs and gods all learned their shape from moving water. Then, in the long bright noon of the modern age, we forgot. We decided the river was not a relative but a resource; not a someone, but a something to be dammed, drained, measured and sold.

Rivers of Life is the slow, deliberate work of remembering. It is a movement told one river at a time. Each chapter is a pilgrimage: a caravan of friends who set out toward a river the law has begun to call a person, and are quietly re-made by the current of the journey. Because a river carries more than water. It carries the oldest thing we know about love — that two can meet, and merge, and move on as one, and still remain wholly themselves.

Chapter One — The Magpie (complete)

Muteshekau-Shipu runs three hundred kilometres of whitewater through the Côte-Nord of Québec — one of the last great free-flowing rivers on the continent. For the Innu of Ekuanitshit it has always been a relative. In 2021, the Innu Council and the Minganie municipality did in law what their knowing had never doubted: they recognized the river as a legal person, with nine rights of its own and guardians to defend them.

The idea began in Toronto, inside an artist collective called POM — a wild, chaotic, deeply-loved house where displaced people found their way back to authentic connection. Tan had a grant before he had a goal. He came to rivers by way of personhood, and to personhood by way of rivers, and one day the two clicked into the same sentence.

Two RVs. A rotating band of strangers who became a family. They drove north — Toronto, Tamworth, Montreal, Quebec City, the truck-stop night, the Côte-Nord — and slept on the bank of the Magpie. They ran the rapids. At the waterfall, where the whole weight of the river throws itself over the edge and falls endlessly into grace, the argument dissolved. She does not care to be called a person. She is a wild river. Having found her sacred, they clothed her in personhood not to elevate her, but to protect her from us — to buy the law time to catch up with what the Innu always knew. On the way home: three breakdowns, relationships fraying, the caravan separating exactly the way a river would. That is the film. That is the beginning of the movement.

■ *“As soon as you name something — as soon as you catch it in language — you crystallize it. You can see it so clearly. And you stop it from changing. You lose some aspect of its divinity. I think if we could speak like water, if we could be like a river, we wouldn't hurt so much.”*

— Tan, from the film's opening

The three currents (every chapter)

A-STORY — THE JOURNEY

The caravan. Preparation, challenges, the road's own philosophy. Viewers travel with the participants and witness emotional and intellectual growth as the landscape changes under them. Malick by way of the open road: an adventure series with a soul.

B-STORY — THE INTERVIEWS

Guides, elders, poets, scientists, guardians, truckers, people who live with the river. Diverse viewpoints and cross-cultural concepts — depth without lecture, testimony without extraction.

C-STORY — LIMNOLOGY AS METAPHOR

The grammar of water is the grammar of love. Confluence, tributary, eddy, dam, canal, subsume, ephemeral river, individuality and unity — not metaphors forced onto water, but the words rivers already had for what we do to one another. Learn the river, and you learn the relationship. A film about rivers is always a film about us.

Philosophy — Two-Eyed Seeing

Guided by Etuaptmumk — Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall's principle that we can hold the gift of Western science in one eye and the gift of Indigenous knowing in the other, and together see more of the living world than either could alone. One eye: limnology, hydrology, the chemistry of flow — precise, rigorous, indispensable. The other eye: the river as kin, held in reciprocal community across a hundred generations. To see with two eyes is not to compromise between them. It is to see, at last, in full depth. The crisis was built inside one way of seeing. The way out will not be found there either.

Tone

Luminous, unhurried, unafraid of silence. Reverent without piety. Adventure without conquest. The camera finds both the waterfall's violence and the soft moment a relationship eddies on itself. Kitchen tables and cosmic weather in the same hour. Being-with nature — not being-above it, not being-outside it.

■ *“Where two waters meet, neither is diminished. This is the whole of it. This is what the river has been trying to teach us for four billion years.”*

— Series heart