

The Vision of a Native Filmmaker

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Randolph Lewis, *Alanis Obomsawin: The Vision of a Native Filmmaker*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

Indigenous cultures have long been under the gaze of European colonizers, governments, and anthropologists. In terms of anthropology one needs only remember that North American anthropology was founded upon the study of Native North Americans. In fact, this focus is one factor that has marked the discipline's identity. During this long history of observation, anthropology has recorded the indigenous "other" and helped create many misconceptions. The concept of *otherness* is critical to deconstructing the "Indian" and defining it as a concept created to explain something not of the *self*. Thus, diverse indigenous cultures were reduced to the "Indian", the "primitive" or to a "race", ignoring the possible indigenous "selves", groups, and histories in favor of a stagnant shadow of "Indianness" fueled by the dominant society.

Changes in the observation of indigenous cultures came in the form of the American Indian movement in North America, from some new players in the field of anthropology, and from books such as Robert F. Berkhofer's entitled, *The White Man's Indian* published in 1978. However, if one looks to the North one is reminded of the work of Alanis Obomsawin, an indigenous filmmaker beginning her work during this same period and a woman ahead of her time.

As the author of this text describes in his preface, "Obomsawin is one of the relatively few figures that can be discerned in the long fog of cultural invisibility that has engulfed First Nation's people and their artistry, like indigenous people almost everywhere. She is a portal". Two aspects of this quote should be highlighted: the "cultural invisibility" of First Nations people, the Abenaki in this case, and the point made by this author concerning the lack of published information concerning indigenous documentary filmmakers. Native American fiction films have

had some presence in the popular media, but indigenous documentaries have been less publicized. This brings one to the subject of indigenous media.

Representations of indigenous peoples in early fictional films, art, ethnographic as well as documentary films began almost simultaneously with the birth of film itself. The non-indigenous filmmakers attempting to tell the story of indigenous groups almost always overshadowed indigenous perspectives. However, initial works such as *Nanook of the North* presented the viewer with a staged vision of a vanishing and “primitive” “Eskimo” culture. Edward Curtis created *In the Land of the Head Hunters* filmed in 1914, which is a vision of the Kwakwaka’waku before contact. Both of these films had all indigenous casts, but convey more romantic stereotyped visions of the filmmaker’s societies than they ultimately inform one about the views or cultures of the groups filmed. Yet, they did one thing many other films did not; they used indigenous actors, in contrast to the various examples throughout the years, which used painted caricatures to play the role of the “Indian”.

The roots of the exploration of the indigenous filmmaker began in similar company as those early films with the union of non-indigenous and indigenous perspectives. One of the first attempts at this exploration was in the ethnographic work, which wished, as it says on the back cover of the text, to “grasp the native’s point of view”. The text was entitled: *Through Navajo Eyes, An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology* and was published in 1972. This anthropological attempt to understand the indigenous point of view has a similar root as those of a project called Video in the villages, which began in 1986 and has evolved into a vital source of Brazilian indigenous perspectives in the media.

Another central source is the National Museum of American Indian film and Video Center (1979) whose goal has been to be the most complete source of indigenous film in the Americas. Indigenous film festivals have also led the way in presenting and promoting the indigenous perspective in filmmaking. Perhaps the most vital sources are the indigenous filmmakers themselves. This in-depth text and preface by Randolph Lewis provides one with the opportunity to better understand the experiences of such an established indigenous filmmaker. In Lewis’s treatment of Alanis’s childhood one also becomes aware of how her differences as

a female of Abenaki descent interacting in the outside or “white” world has affected her sense of identity and made her films stronger. The artist can understand the role of her work in this quote:

“Documentary film is the one place that our people can speak for themselves. I feel that the documentaries that I’ve been working on have been very valuable for the people, for our people to look at ourselves, at the situations, really facing it, and through that being able to make changes that really count for the future of our children to come” (Alanis Obomsawin Mihesuah, Devon A. *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. (p. 153)

Documentary films made such indigenous filmmakers let the culture and people speak for themselves and in Alanis’s case one gets a female perspective.

Indigenous women inhabit a position often neglected in favor of the stereotyped “western male dominated warrior” cultures, which were created and still live in the psyche of popular culture today. This is one reason her film *Mother of Many Children* is so important. Alanis Obomsawin presents a matrilineal perspective in this film. As Zuzana Pick states:

“While documenting how First Nations women experience life from birth to old age, the film situates the multiple ways in which First Nations women’s identities and experiences have been historically shaped and articulated” (Zuzana Pick, “Storytelling and Resistance: The Documentary Practice of Alanis Obomsawin.” In *Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women’s Cinema*, edited by Kay Armatage, Kass Banning, Brenda Longfellow, and Janine Marchessault. University of Toronto Press, 1999 (p. 81).

Lewis explores this on page 41, where he highlights that *Mother of Many Children*, her 1977 film, is a subtle document of female empowerment. It begins with an epigraph claiming that there is no *he* or *she* in Native languages, gently establishing a feminist theme that is inherent rather than overt. “This statement opens up a discussion concerning the female indigenous perspective, which the film itself takes. This text not only provides one with the female point of view on filmmaking, but it explores Alanis’s background as an indigenous person and as a filmmaker. She discusses her films and enters into a discourse that seems to drive

Osbornsawin and indigenous media today.

Sources:

LEWIS, Randolph, *Alanis Obomsawin: The Vision of a Native Filmmaker*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

MIHESUAH, Devon A., *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

PICK, Zuzana, "Storytelling and Resistance: The Documentary Practice of Alanis Obomsawin" in *Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women's Cinema*, edited by Kay Armatage, Kass Banning, Brenda Longfellow, and Janine Marchessault, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.